it never sings vain

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/27866662.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Will Graham's Father, Alana Bloom, Beverly Katz, Matthew Brown (Hannibal), Brian Zeller, Jimmy Price, Hannibal Lecter, Mischa Lecter, Abigail Hobbs, Georgia Madchen, Francis Dolarhyde, Katherine Pimms, James Gray, Tobias Budge, The Stag (Hannibal), Margot Verger, Chiyoh (Hannibal)
Additional Tags:	Cults, Baltic Mythology, Inspired by Midsommar (2019), Suicide, Cannibalism, Human Sacrifice, Ritual Sex, Murder, Non-Consensual Drug Use, Age Difference, Alternate Universe, Will Graham is Undoubtedly Sick, Mental Coercion, Extremely Dubious Consent, Minor Character Death
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2020-12-03 Completed: 2021-02-08 Words: 117,037 Chapters: 10/10

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by chaparral_crown

Summary

Will Graham, sharp-eyed and sharp-mouthed, has always been a bit weird with his uncanny sense of doomed fate.

After a traumatic Christmas, floating through his masters program with the reluctant help of his friends, a chance meeting at a lecture with known Doctor Emeritus and Professor of Lithuanian Culture, Hannibal Lecter, puts him on the spot to make a change.

An invitation to see the insular Lecter Estate's nine-day celebration of the Rasos festival is just the kind of mental reset he needs. Doctor Lecter is certain of it.

Notes

We may not have had to actually mudwrestle to decide who wrote it, but we mudwrestled in my heart. Thanks for the cool space to hang out, with zero bears.

A couple of notes:

-Please do not take this in any way to be a good look at Lithuania, Romuva, or pre-Christian Baltic Age religious practices. I've also treated a lot of this content like a salad bar in Whole Foods: a little bit of anything I like, nutrition be damned.
-I illustrate things for this story! Please check out my Twitter @ChaparralCrown if you'd like to see, or get other updates for works in progress.

you remember that christmas

Christmas is a difficult holiday.

There are nine hundred and sixty eight miles between Will and his father, which grows in size in his head year over year. Will crosses them for the conventionally important dates without question, even if he is driving into the stagnant quiet of an old doublewide house where his Daddy will watch a football game and make sniping comments at the presenters, and leave Will to his own devices in the usually empty loveseat sofa to his right.

Nothing changes about the landscape or the highway; it's all green roadsides with small towns and overgrown sheds and tractors and the segmenting of little lives between barbed wire fences and poles. Will could have lived in any of these spaces, pulled between bodies of water as a child, chasing work with Beau Graham by the seasons. They are all the same, homogenized in their communities by insular things - familiarity, the houses of God, the inexplicable need to be near people they know.

(*Poverty, nostalgia, the certainty of their blue collar righteousness goes unspoken. This you know to be an American trait, not exclusively a Southern one.*)

It is Christmas Eve when Will drives these nine hundred and sixty eight miles from Washington DC to Mobile, Alabama for the fifth time in as many years for this particular holiday, fourteen hours and some change of yellow lines and asphalt, weaving between semi-trucks and joy riders who have been at home for a few days now. College, more than the miles, have widened this divide between Will and Beau. Each year further into his master's program is another threshold to cross until Will Graham isn't the quiet son of a mechanic anymore. His hands are clean of oil and no longer cracked from washing with bar soap. It comes to mind every time Beau pulls him in for his brand of hugging, more of a clasp of the shoulders with one arm, a broad hand coming up to Will's neck where it roughly holds the soft skin there, unchanged by time.

Daddy smells like cigarettes, and the damp pine and plywood planks of the house, and he wetly coughs sometimes when he speaks too long. The old man doesn't have much to do in

the winter, work dried up for someone who can't work the freight shipping yards anymore, so he stays inside and keeps to himself until Will shakes the rust from him.

The old tinsel Christmas tree is in the corner of the living room behind him, glowing with big C9 lights that are meant for the house, not for the tree. All the ornaments are hanging, which is more than he usually does, even the ones that belonged to Will's mother, unremarked on and never present. It's nice - unusual, but nice.

They settle into Daddy's little house with the usual awkwardness, Beau never inclined to chat, and Will, thinking more about why people do things instead of actually doing them, never inclined to push that.

"How's th' road?" his Daddy asks, and grabs him a beer from the fridge.

"Wet, and full of morons," he replies, something he's said and heard even more times than he's made the drive. (*An old joke repeated over decades, which never gets tired because both of you know it, and no one else.*) Will shrugs off his coat - Daddy always keeps the house like a furnace these days. "Not too different from my last class of the semester or yesterday's shift at the restaurant, all things considered."

"D'you think you'll fly next time?" asks Daddy. "Hate you havin' to drive to see my sorry hide. Long time to be by you'self and not stop."

"Too much money," Will dodges. "It's only once or twice a year, and the drive is good to clear my head. Probably how you feel about the boats, yeah?"

They don't have a lot in common anymore between the degrees, so there are safe spaces to discuss that Will intellectually knows his Daddy likes. Fishing, sailing, how the Saints are doing on the leaderboard, if University of Alabama is going to be at the Rose Bowl this year before remembering the Citrus Bowl is the correct one. They only really call each other if they need some information, or someone's feeling homesick, and Will hasn't been properly homesick since his first semester staying in the dorms as a freshman.

Beau nods, like this makes sense, one of the pre-approved topics of conversation that he's answered half a million times in his lifetime. "How long y'got down 'dis way?" he asks, settling into his armchair. "Hate to keep y'all this time from work."

"Just until day after tomorrow. I didn't bring much," says Will. "Gotta head back up north for work and get some hours in before class starts up again. We don't do anything for New Years, so I didn't really plan extra time to hang around town."

"No," says Daddy. "Nothin' special this year," he sighs, and takes a long drink of his beer, going warm in his hand.

He sends Will to bed after a dinner of takeout breaded fish fillets and potato skins, in the spare bedroom where the scratchy granny-square blanket that belonged to some passed family member always tickles at his arm, unaccountably hot even in the chilly gulf weather in December. He idles in the doorway, watching his son settle into the narrow twin bed.

"Y'got everythin' y'need?" Beau asks.

(*Place to sleep, place to park the car, place to spend Christmas because you can't spend it alone in the apartment without Beverly there, that's weird, that's not how you're supposed to spend family holidays. Place to charge your phone, place to eat breakfast in the morning, and hand over a hard-earned bottle of nice bourbon that Daddy won't appreciate, but you don't know what to get him, he never seems to want anything.*)

Will smiles, pulls a long sleeved henley on to cover his arms, and gives Beau a nod. "All good, Daddy. Everything's in the usual spot, and I've known where the bathroom is since you moved in."

Beau shuffles a little at that, looking like he wants to add something else. He doesn't - he gives Will another one of his single armed embraces, wrinkled hand to the collar and pulse of Will's neck, and puts his face to Will's curls.

"G'night," he says. "Sleep tight. I'll see you in th' mornin'."

Another thing, repeated over years. Will doesn't think anything of it, one of Beau Graham's rare affections. He turns out the lights and pulls up the scratchy blanket, and sweats until he falls asleep in the mildew-damp of an old house with an old man he knows living in it with things he recognizes.

Will maybe sleeps for an hour or two when he is awoken by the unmistakable sound of a gun. He stands abruptly, sweaty, itching at the neck.

He stomps out the door of his room, feet chilly on the high-nap of ugly brown carpet, until the glow of the Christmas tree in the living room comes into view with the neglected sofa and the armchair and the powerful dread of *this-isn't-the-routine-this-isn't-normal* . He expects an intruder, or a mistake, and the intentionality of what he actually sees leaves observant, smart-mouthed Will with nothing to say.

Christmas is a difficult holiday in Will's second year of his graduate program, because Beau Graham, with a cheap Remington bolt-action rifle that is meant more for shooting turkeys than for men, takes out the backside of his neck through the soft palate of his throat.

Beau doesn't hit quite right - Will knows he doesn't hit quite right because he gasps and gasps and gasps, and Will calls the paramedics because that's what you do, right? He drops to the floor to try to do something because he can't just stand there. He's taking in the twinkling of the cheap glass C9 lights on an old tinsel tree, something of his grandparents, hands both cold and warm and so itchy from the blood pouring onto them and sealing solid where it dries. He's taking in the smell mixed with the rotting wood-panels, and the mustiness of decorations not long taken out of storage. He's taking in that he doesn't know how to fix this, that there's no instruction for this situation when it belongs to you - there is no forensics that make this sit sensibly the way that academic case studies do.

Will doesn't cry, just makes a long sound, with long measures in between. His mouth quirks when he thinks about it in hindsight - something more akin to the low agony of stubbing your toe, only it's not his toe but his whole body and the shock of pain has overtaken his ability to speak. There's nothing he can really tell the paramedics when they arrive, because isn't what they see enough to understand?

(*The gurgling guh-hahhhhh of breath next to you. Twitching hands, something that had just been on your neck 120 minutes ago, trying to find something.*)

Beau Graham dies on the stretcher out the door. Will wishes he had better aim or a bigger gun. Will wishes he had shot Beau again when he found him, because that would have been mercy, and this is just *painpainpain* . His own nerves are alive with it - thousands upon thousands of them meeting in the shallow depths of his skin. He should follow them to the hospital, or the coroner's office - they have to go somewhere like that to confirm the obvious right? Will needs to give a statement to the officers that shuffle in right after the stretcher, but he doesn't know where his Daddy's being carried off to, and this, more than anything else that's happened so far, upsets him.

Will calls Alana last, when he's found the house keys to lock up and he thinks he can drive to the police station. No hospital for Beau Graham this time; he can have the forensics lab say the same thing as the emergency room attending, without the bill.

(*Nobody thinks about that, when they're asking you what's happening. Fuck no, you don't know his Social Security number offhand. Fuck no, you didn't know this was even a tracery of thought in his mind. You would have skipped the weekend closing shift if you knew. You think you would have done a lot of things differently. You would have stayed up, you would have said I love you, because growing chasms of easy conversation does not make a void for your filial love to die in.*)

Alana's his girlfriend - or she was anyway, a year or so ago when Will hasn't withdrawn further into himself and his school yet. There's no one else to talk to, so ***Alana Bloom*** gleams promisingly from a budget phone's favorite contacts list. (*So too does* ***Beau Graham*** *- you talked seven times since July. That's once every three weeks. You never marked him as "Daddy" - it felt unprofessional, like someone might look down at your phone and make a professional decision based on it.*)

They still talk, the way that older sisters talk to needy young brothers. She's friends with his roommate. He likes to think they're still friends too, and that she looks overlong at him because even though Will is bad boyfriend material, he's still an attractive twenty-something that called her beautiful, and validates her kindness and her foresight, and if things could just be a little different, if he could grow into something that's *not him* ...That's fair.

He says “Dad’s dead,” and is just happy she doesn’t ask if he’s the reason why.

(*Well of course it is - you always did tell him he was going to kill himself if he stopped working and started thinking. You will too, so you’d better keep working.*)

“Oh Will,” she sighs from across the country, and Will feels the pressure of what he thinks are tears beneath his eyes, looking for fractured bedrock to rupture in the surface of his face.

(*This is where you, Will Graham, add another threshold of separation. Nine hundred and sixty eight miles between you and your father, six years in college, and an entry wound the size of a dime with an exit wound the size of an orange.*)

Will’s history is one full of blunt statements made from observation - it doesn’t make friends, or careers, or particularly happy relationships, but the same way that icicles form on the eaves of houses, waiting in readiness to fall, so too does Will’s keen sense of truth.

It’s charming when he’s younger, aging relatives passing him between each other when they do the rounds, checking in on *great-aunt-so-and-so* or bringing a smoked pork special for lunch to *your daddy’s cousin Neta* , like he’s learned a particularly complex party trick. His judge of character is impeccable, and it leads him down pathways in relationships that no one really wants to hear, and he’s almost always right. Words like autism and empathy disorder are toyed with, but they don’t quite capture the entirety of Will’s skill.

It starts early. This, more than his mental acuity or actual capacity for understanding people is often cited to him as the start of his problems. Oh, poor Will, troubled child, going between separated parents, not sure who he can trust, like hyperempathy and bad social graces can be blamed on bad breeding and child rearing. He stays between his father’s and his mother’s house when he’s very young, which is really his grandparents house and his mother keeps the

room of a young girl in it, because she's always between hysterias, and his nana thinks she never did quite come back from being pregnant like a normal person.

"Your mama ain't right in the head," his father tells him in a matter of fact way one day when Will asks what's wrong with her, his freckled and scruffed cheeks red from yelling. (*He never yells around you - he never does anything extreme, says you get enough of that shit from your momma, and hindsight's a real bitch, isn't it?*) "She don't mean nothin' by it," he adds, like he's ashamed to have said it. Beau doesn't have Will's unvarnished ability to deliver uncomfortable news, not when he's young and even less so as Will ages.

As he ages, he can see in the rear view mirror, looking at the disaster they've passed, that she had fits, the way that oracles have fits, the ground opening up underneath her to see into god's eye. God's eye isn't often rubbed, and goes between beauty and horror at a pace that a girl-child young woman at 23 years old isn't equipped to handle. At 6 years old, Will doesn't really understand mental illness outside that she is sad and angry a lot, and she has a wild smile and sparkling eyes.

"I'm 'fraid sometimes she won' be there when I wake up," he admits. "She goes out to th' porch real late. Can't sleep until she comes back inside." Daddy tells him not to wait up for her, but she wakes Will up even if he doesn't, so it helps him to know when to expect her, rushing in like a night breeze smelling of menthols.

One night she doesn't - come back inside, that is. Will stays awake until dawn, rolled to his side and staring out into the grey spaces of his room waiting for the tell-tale jingle of a charm bracelet. When he gets up at the first blush of sun, just as he's been told he's allowed to, he finds her on her face and blue-cheeked on the old porch. She has a stroke. She was likely gone before she ever took a seat at midnight, but nobody checked on her, and her short wild life ends there.

(*Your fault, your six year old mind thinks. You shouldn't have said that. Somebody should wash the words out with soap. Adult you knows she had a drug problem, and a medication problem, and a mixing drugs with medication problem, as you will come to learn many undertreated schizophrenics do, but the feeling remains, greasy bright - you shouldn't have spoken that into the world and given it a shape.*)

Fortunately as Will ages, he makes a lot of less crucial observances - one can't speak death to their mother more than once, and Beau Graham never remarries, and never forgives anyone

that Will was allowed to see it. “He wouldn’t want anyone else anyway,” Will says at age 12, when a counselor asks him about it. “Too much work.”

He bets the homecoming queen’s boyfriend will hit her, one time when she calls Will a creep, and the satisfaction of seeing yellowing bruises is less than his guilt for them being there, like his bet manifested them. He tells his friend Beverly that she’ll get into the graduate program she wants, even though she doesn’t have the money and she doesn’t have the grades, and the letter to George Washington University comes a month later. He qualifies too and follows after - different degree program, different grades. By all rights he should probably go to a different school, but he can’t imagine starting over with new people. Will doesn’t have a lot of friends that stick around despite the blunt statements, and Beverly seems impervious to them.

The rare few girlfriends are verbally dressed down, but not a single shoulder bared: “You’re not mature enough for this.” “You’ll always be trying to fix me.” “Your feelings about your parents’ divorce are nothing like mine.”

When Alana comes along, he says he won’t be enough for her, that something is always just a bit off no matter the attraction and the mutual intelligence, and it’s true - they kiss and six months later she’s avoiding him, more interested in the ways he doesn’t click with the rest of their friends, always trying to dig past his avoidance of emotional vulnerability, tired of feeling the need to cover for his awkwardness and biting answers. “I’m not...compatible with the way you are,” she says guiltily, and Will nods, because he expected it. He said it months before, so he has no right to be upset now, though his stomach still drops out when he sees the conversation coming in a small coffee shop off of the National Mall.

(*She doesn’t need to soften it for you - you’d accept kid’s gloves if you wanted that, but you’re used to staring into the sun of your ugly mind, and those who can’t watch you do it need not apply.*)

He rolls forward into the forensic biology program, considers if he should get an MD for autopsy and post-mortems, gets trapped thinking about other people, and the university traps him in Psychology courses with Beverly and Alana who are studying very different things, but all fall squarely on human behavior and wickedness. “I’m more interested in dead people than living ones,” he says offhandedly. “Incidentally, they’re more useful to me.”

Will becomes a veritable algorithm for spotting program dropouts. He prophecies failed thesis defences. He calls out a professor in the fall that looks like she's on the verge of a breakdown - he means it kindly, just tells her "you don't have to like your job, you just have to do it," when he asks after a poorly scored and poorly amended draft for a research paper. She lasts the week, and moves out of the country the next, pregnant, unhappy with the father and with the workload and moves in with her parents at home in France. It's hot gossip amongst the faculty of the forensics and law departments, plenty of "I heard Will saw her last". Will shrugs this all off, the way he shrugs off Alana, the way he shrugs off his father trying to work his way past his unhappiness with life.

It starts being a joke that you shouldn't ask for an opinion from Will Graham - or at least don't ask if you don't want to know. He'll make you or he'll break you. Will just stops trying to talk to people, afraid he does more breaking than making.

People are weird around him after Daddy passes. They should be. Will was weird even before he contemplates the bolt-action of the gun when he hears silverware being returned to the kitchen drawer or washed in the back galley of the restaurant, or that he stares into the fairy lights that Beverly has clipped a bunch of polaroids to on the living room wall of their apartment. He might have called them endearing before, a small curation of photos by a woman not normally inclined to acts of sentimentality, but now each glowing bulb is the tip of a foiled tree branch. The red light from the living room window of a car backing up outside is the flash of ambulance lights.

He stared at them for the better part of an hour when he came home the first time. Will felt vacuous and stupid, feet heavy under the weight of three bags of luggage instead of the usual one, because he has to clear his father's house of anything valuable. It's only once she walks up to him and gives a worried "are you ok?" that he stops. Will didn't tell her, not before coming home anyway. It slipped his mind, out the back maybe like things are inclined to do after Christmas Day. Alana must have not told her either, if the way her thin brows contract means anything.

(*That there are only two more bags to add from an entire house says more about you than about your Daddy. He would have wanted you to keep things, if only to say you had something of his. But all you can do is move on autopilot, throwing things away, Alana having flown down from her parents home in Virginia to help and watching from the sides, offering photos like they are gold. "Wouldn't you like to keep these?" she asks, and you shake your head, not even turning to look.*)

(*Don't think about it. Don't think about it.*)

She leaves the lights turned off these days. She talks about maybe getting paper pennants for summer to hang things from, or a pinboard. They'll have lots of pictures to add, she says, after her research trip with the other guys.

By all rights, the two of them shouldn't have met. Beverly and Will go all the way back to high school, pushed together by biting humor and school district merit enrollments to honors classes. Will lives in a rent-controlled apartment with his dad while he works in the port of New Orleans, and she's a military brat, surely destined for one of the naval base schools. She's undisturbed by him and his long-limbed surliness, taking a while to grow into his bright eyes and sharp tongue. Will thinks they met over bitching about the income credit lunches, but it's the kind of thing you don't discuss around colleagues, and it's left forgotten in some drawer to maybe someday be thrown out for a better story.

"I fucking hate white bread sub sandwiches," is what Will thinks she said.

"They have to punish you for not having money while still feeding you," is what Will thinks he said back, a blue-collar kid from Kindergarten to graduation gown.

Hard to get into government jobs with an attitude like that. That's the dream, right? Tenured, secure, interesting careers that get them away from their upbringing, with none of the transience. Forget the white bread sandwiches, and the humidity, and the long bus rides between home and school - they're building a life away from that, and anything that stops them is not useful.

(*You call home less. You worry more about grades, and distancing yourself from things people try to pin you down by - no more "bad homelife" or "special needs" or "income assisted therapy." You're functional, and productive, and no matter your history and your smart mouth and uncanny understanding of sad things people don't want to look in the eye, you can have this. At a cost.*)

Spring break brings extra time away from the university, and the boon of the summer research trip's grant clearing, and the approval of Doctor DuMaurier, who is only too happy to send Beverly and her fellows overseas and out of her hair for a bit. The great and mighty European and Eurasian Studies graduates are all abuzz, planning trajectories in international peacekeeping and intelligence, landing a full three week trip to study the rise of Baltic paganism and post-Soviet cultural renaissances.

Beverly's fellow researchers come over and they watch movies together as some sort of attempt to bond over shared research money. Alana comes too, because Alana is a grantee as well, and Alana is everywhere, shepherding Will like he doesn't know when to go to bed, or to speak in normal conversations. Beverly has wisely come to understand that benign neglect is the correct answer to Will's strangeness these days, but Alana is burdened still by the empty spaces in Beau Graham's house, and Will's quiet inability to process anything of his family as being anything other than trash.

(*That's not entirely true. You keep a tackle box of lures you've seen a hundred of a hundred times. You keep Valentines cards passed between Daddy and your momma, who had bubbly handwriting, but never anything particularly profound to say. You have a stuffed rabbit instead of a teddy bear with worn down ears that it physically pains you to put into the dumpster. You just don't bother with much of the photos, or the glassware that your grandmother swore up and down was rare and valuable, or old paper records of your lineage, birth rights, marriages of people you'll never meet. You're not an inheritor. You're a poor Southern boy, and the only valuable thing in the whole house is in the morgue.*)

Alana's nails are soft pink tonight - Will doesn't think about them in his hair, and how good it used to feel to have someone touch him. He knows Alana doesn't think the same way anymore. Will blinks the thought away with the crisp *snick* of a can of beer opening.

"Thank fuck," sighs Beverly. "I was beginning to think it was too good to be true."

"Yeah, Vilnius kind of dicked around about who was responsible for funding the damn thing," says Brian, a year behind them in time accepted to a master's program, but a year ahead in attitude about it. "It's a little weird that the Lithuanian Studies program didn't want

to do it and it came down to a private donor, but I'm not about to look a gift horse in the face."

"Doctor Lecter wouldn't invite us without some kind of help to support it," Beverly shrugs. "I'm just sorry it took up so much of his time to make it happen."

"Well cheers to Doctor Lecter for holding his word over bureaucratic bullshit," says Matthew, sharp faced and smiling while holding a little glass punch cup in hand full of spiced rum, something bought as a joke for a friendly Thanksgiving, but only now getting used after - well, after Christmas. "May his generosity to us ballsy souls not end at the airport. I still think his commune thing is suspicious as fuck."

"Not all of us were pushy about it," says Alana with an elegant shrug of her own, drinking her rum with a wincing smile. She gets red in the face when she drinks, made more obvious by laughing. "Some of us got grant funds without turning it into a 'per my last email' chain."

"Some of us opted not to wax poetic about pre-Christian rural family life, mother goddess cults, and reclaiming matriarchal spaces, but maybe that's just me," Beverly sighs.

Everyone makes dinner, a spaghetti with sauce out of the jar because no one here likes the same things, and they never can agree on something more adventurous. Will takes in the plateful of noodles and wilted salad with a placid nod, and doesn't eat it with dressing. Ranch dressing is for Daddy's fridge, and he doesn't really like any of the other flavors. It's been almost four full months since the holidays now, and he's gotten better at modulating his reaction to things like that.

The movie comes on - something tense and lonely shot between aspen and pine trees, protagonist looking appropriately burdened and masculine. (*Do you think he shredded a decade's worth of his father's tax returns by hand recently as well?*) Everyone is hushed but laughing at the seriousness of the film, made a little too frank by their cups of rum between cheap beers. Nobody here hunts, except for Will a couple times years ago, so nobody here has an appreciation for it, highly recommended cinema or not.

The hero takes a shot at a deer, and Will goes white and miserable when it falls and doesn't die.

It’s just supposed to be foreshadowing for a stupid movie, ham-fisted in presentation and the brightness of the blood, but Will spills his drink on the couch anyway.

“Shit, Will, are you ok?” says Matthew, who after a moment’s shock, gives a little hooting laugh. “Couldn’t you have spilled something else? It’s an aged rum, for god’s sake.” Yes, Will thinks, so he said multiple times over cheap pasta, saved for a special occasion.

Will just gapes for a moment trapped on the left side of the couch. There’s a stain underneath his right thigh, where a shitty cabernet met a grisly end a year ago during another house party like this. The stain never quite comes out. He feels it on the back of a hamstring as sure as another exit wound.

Beverly pulls him by the shirt, and he follows, mute and stupid as the first day he comes home with three bags. She’s good at recognizing these things now. They happen often enough that it’s not an issue of communication as much as thoughtful observance. She’ll make a great agent someday, Will just knows it.

He leaves the room because of course he does. Beverly helps him into his room, and closes the door. Will has the momentary sensation of being a dog put in the yard to howl - misbehaved, not fit for guests. So instead he takes a bath. Nobody asks him if he’s ok in the hours that follow because he’s not, and besides, they can use Beverly’s bathroom if they really need one. This one smells like cheap mint shampoo, but Will’s nose is too clogged from crying between shaking hands to really notice he’s used too much. The milky white of suds on the top of the water is something to fixate on and run between his fingers when he needs them cleaned again.

(*You used to be able to keep it together - you never realized how close you were to not. It’s everyone else you break down to digestible size up until now, and it’s an unpleasant surprise to find you taste just as bad as the rest of the world’s sorry fucks.*)

Things like this happen after Christmas. Things like this happen a lot.

Beverly and Alana suffer through it with him until the end of the spring semester, and no one's quite able to express how relieved they are for an opportunity to take a break from the grading of papers, the classes, the grant writing, and Will Graham.

Except for Will Graham, who of course tells them to have a good time - he hears plans for their trip to Europe, how they've been invited to join a family celebration of Rasos, the Lithuanian Midsummer if they would be so kind as to indulge the professor in Vilnius. Will's not invited - he's not part of the program, or an adjacent program as Alana is, and not particularly inclined to family holidays in any country this year, and maybe not for several more. He's ok with that.

"I'm bad company," he says blandly, and waves off protests to the contrary, little polite things made by sisterly women who need a break but ashamedly don't want to admit to it.

Will's perception of this trip changes on a Wednesday. He doesn't do anything personally to make this happen other than to dutifully run through taxa of insects that will be referenced in a paper he is second author on. (*You would write a better one as first author, you think. You lack focus so you can't be first author even if you deserved it, and that's an itch you can't reach to scratch, but you blink it off the way cattle blink off flies, unflinching.*)

They're in the broad center aisle of the Gelman Library, little dark and neutral specks in the candy-red of the armchairs that sit in tidy groups of four. Today is a good day because it is warm, and structured, and the white noise of book carts and study groups of undergraduates talking about finals. He can leave anytime if it's too much, and no one needs to guide him. He's not part of the topic of discussion either, which makes it easy to passively listen and ignore when it pleases him. He can mentally keep his head under water until he has to blink.

"If I couldn't write this off as a study-abroad opportunity, there's no fucking way I could afford rent and the flights," Beverly sighs, grading papers for her student-teacher position for the semester. There's a proliferation of red marks - both from a red pen for corrections, and comments that have a touch too pointed a tone. "Doctor Lecter said not to worry about food

and lodging during the holiday week we're with him, that the old family house is plenty large enough for us, but I hate not having pocket money just in case."

"You ought to bring a damn satellite phone and a knife," Brian mutters. "God knows I'm going to. The whole thing sounds like the beginning of a Hostel movie."

When Will bothers to turn his head to look at his roommate in question, Beverly shrugs. "Zeller thinks they're terrorists or traffickers or something," she says with a roll of her eyes. "Nevermind that Lithuanian paganism is one of the most old and durable religions - survived Christianity, World War 2, the Soviet Union, and modern secularism. More than half the damn country observes midsummer traditions, nevermind the greater Baltic Sea adjacent countries."

"Makes it even weirder," rejoins Matthew from across the room, talking in confidence next to Brian, looking very sharp and thin against the red leather of his chair. He's not been doing writing for his thesis work as much as he's been trying to get Will and the perennially friendly Jimmy to read some forum speculation that neither of them have any skill with - Polish isn't exactly the second language choice du jour, even here. "Come on, Bev, it's weird that Lecter's group is a splinter group. It's totally fair to call them a cult."

"Insular is the word you're looking for, and you can tell that to him yourself at the lecture," she huffs. "But no promises that I don't lock you in a closet if I see you pull out that dumb blog again and ask him about it. We've been invited to see the Lecters' super private and endemic Rasos week, and I will literally kill you if you ruin that for me."

"Doctor Lecter is known for being particularly stingy for manners and hospitality," Jimmy whispers. Will nods, though it's the first he's heard of it, no matter how many times the name "Doctor Lecter" has been mentioned in passing since the grant's approval.

Jimmy isn't going, has no dog in the fight much like Will - "family vacation in Vancouver," he begs off, and keeps Will company between conversations that he really doesn't play a part in. He would love to go, the grant is open for him if he wants, but mother calls, and Will doesn't know what that's like, only that it seems important. "Literally would not survive to the next holiday if I say no," Jimmy explains with a laugh at first, before wincing.

(Well intended joke. Not a crack at your uncomfortableness. Apologetic. "I know you didn't mean anything by it," you say, to make him feel better while you embrace a kind of puzzling numbness. Maybe there's something to that whole getting easier with time thing that the campus counselor keeps pushing on you like a tacky pamphlet.)

"We don't have to go, you know," Jimmy says to Will, ignoring the other three, like the two of them are in confidence, and there's nothing to be embarrassed about. "Unless you've got a hard-on for listening to Lithuanian anti-communist efforts in the Soviet Union and predestination as a tenant of Balt religions, in which case be my guest."

"Do *you* have a hard-on for that?" asks Will, smiling, even as Beverly, Matthew, and Brian argue without the benefit of an audience. "Sounds like it's right up your alley, big Cold War nerds that you all are. We should go."

Jimmy smiles, a little relieved despite himself. "You should see who all the fuss is about anyway. Beverly and the guys probably owe Lecter a life debt for finding a donor to cover extra hours and resources, nevermind the whole solstice thing which I don't know if they'll be allowed to even discuss in a paper. Doctor Lecter doesn't mention his family's iterations of the older religious practices much if ever, and he's one of the damn advisory chairs for the field."

"Predestination and mysterious helpful professors setting graduate students out to look for old sites of worship," says Will with a roll of his shoulders, grabbing for a bag and to look at the seminar flyer, sitting idly on the table between the chairs. ***Professor Hannibal Lecter, MD PhD, Vilnius University Chair of Lithuanian Studies, Johns Hopkins University Professor Emeritus of Surgical Medicine*** . It's a mouthful. It's a lot of dedicated hours to academic pursuits and practical application of them. "Very Odin-like of him."

(*A provider of purpose, a thing very slippery and hard to keep hold of. You'd like to meet him if only to sit in the gravity of someone held together, and understand what makes the others stay in their orbit. Let someone else do the thinking for the course of 50 minutes with 25 minutes allotted for questions - maybe it'll turn out they're as vacuous as you, and they've only been waiting for you to say it out loud, like everything else waiting for you to speak and tear it apart.*)

Doctor Lecter is something of a cult figure among the visiting scholars in the DC and Baltimore Metro area. Will has never seen him before, only second-hand accounts of his prowess from Beverly and Alana.

This cult status is ironically separate from the potentially literal cult that Doctor Lecter is one of the leaders of. The Eurasian Studies graduate students talk about ***that*** like it's a particularly fine mutation in a sequence, but secretly. That Brian and Matthew make a distinction between the two is in and of itself very remarkable. The man himself draws attention as readily as Oppenheimer speaking over the radio, or to Brian's perpetually morbid suggestions, as Jim Jones before his Jonestown massacre - grand oration spoken over terrible acts.

(*"So don't drink the Kool Aid," you laugh wryly. "Something's in it."*)

A retired medical doctor known for taking a visiting scholar and surgeon's position at Johns Hopkins and maintaining one foot firmly in the door at Vilnius University, Doctor Lecter floats between continents like a seasonal phenomenon, with no office hours in the Spring semesters left without shiny eyed students to fill them. No one is quite sure what kind of mid-life crisis causes the man to abandon his practice to begin a new tenure as a professor of Lithuanian Studies and Baltic Religions. They only know that he is charismatic, respected, and eminently gracious with the academic community, but a little controversial at home. When asked, he has allegedly never left religion far behind, and the switch is merely coming back to his family. "Tradition frames my rituals both mundane and divine," he famously says when asked.

The cultural studies scholars swoon. The medical students admire his dedication to family and career alike, and plow forward through student loan debt and poor work-life balance with aspirations for similar lives. He lectures often, and his schedule is always unspeakably full.

Leaving the library with satchels and laptop cases full of scrawled notes, there's the surreal sense of meeting a celebrity, like Will's finally getting an opportunity to look at an exotic bird, or a tiger prowling the edges of a bungalow. There's a sprinkling of rain, and half the crew is in hot debate of whether or not it's appropriate to approach the good doctor to discuss summer solstice plans that Will gives only half an ear, which makes sense since he's feeling only half-present.

The offer to take Will elsewhere or to the lecture is expected – Jimmy, as the only other person not expected to go on the research trip, isn't inclined to leave Will behind these days. It doesn't matter that Alana will be there and struggle to focus between concern that he's settled and calm, and that Brian is there as well and doesn't want Will to be, and that Matthew is there with his harrowing, hungry questions (*like he can't get enough of how unhappy you are*), and that Will doesn't know Doctor Lecter any better than any other random researcher talking in the Dorothy Betts Theatre. But where Jimmy's concerned, Will can come if he wants - it's not like the story needs to go any further than that.

(*They think you'll blow your head off someday too, like you've just been waiting to be shown how. You don't know what that says about you before Christmas.)*

But Will digresses – he pinches the flyer in his hands again, looking down at the pavement and his feet marching him in their group to the seminar.

Alana, for her part, is intrigued by the social anthropology and psychology of Doctor Lecter's switch in discipline. Where Brian, Beverly, and Matthew jump at the ability to watch what they perceive to be a potential example of an extremist religious cell developing in otherwise peaceful Northern Europe, Alana sees a cultural reversal. She wants to probe at that rejection of secularism. What are the Lecters' thoughts on global economies? Traditional marriage? Modern medicine? What are the social mores of the neo-Balts? She is a scholar first, and a future member of the American political intelligence network never – it's a wonder she even attends graduate school here and hasn't joined a commune herself to have a Jane Goodall moment.

Jimmy lies somewhere in between. This median is likely why he is not bothered to miss the trip. "Perfectly ambivalent," he explains to Will when he asks one day if he's upset to be left out. "Lots to see and I wish the gang the best, but not my region of study. I'm saving my karma for something in the Balkans next year, and earning some more by visiting my mother. Win-win."

The fascination for Doctor Lecter himself persists with or without the Balkans, and likely with or without the grant, and the holiday, and the polite emails between him and his assistant that always leave Will's friends looking very pleased. And now, to be in his rarified company at a lecture they can all wander into, where they'll have the ability to speak with the man himself by the grace of Beverly's hard-won connection, and their grant naming the esteemed doctor as a sponsor? Well, it merits an outing, and Will's curious what all the fuss is about.

When they sit in the middle rows of the auditorium, and the lights fall dim, Will understands.

Striding up from the side of the stage to stand at the podium, Doctor Lecter is a riot of lines in his black, red, and dark green plaid, pocket square bright and vermillion on his breast over the heart. He keeps his shoulders square and chin up, where flinty gold-red coals for eyes look over the audience in placid, smiling smoothness. His presence is absolute – more real than the blandness of the people before him from slicked greying hair to shiny monkstrap shoes. Will floats into his seat, but Doctor Lecter lands on the stage front like an eagle coming to rest in its aerie.

“Well,” Doctor Lecter starts with a benign smile. “It’s always nice to have a full house for a story, especially on a rainy day such as this one.” He glances across the room, meeting familiar faces and memorizing new ones. When his gaze passes over Will, it doesn’t quite stop, but maybe stutters. Like he knows one of these things is not like the others.

(*You hold your tongue - the compulsion to ask if he knows you is overwhelming. You certainly don’t think you know him. You’d remember.*)

Doctor Lecter’s eyes flick back up, face lit by the projector. “Warm yourselves - we go to far colder places today.”

academia's favorite zealot

For a man wearing plaid and wielding a decidedly Northern European accent around his English with ease, the doctor does an admirable job of keeping the focus on the content and his slides.

“If I am ever unclear, please do not hesitate to ask me to repeat myself,” he says, and not a soul dares. “I can’t promise you won’t still not understand, but you will at least know what I said and have something to mull over until the end of the session.”

He takes a moment to clarify the lecture is from the perspective of ethnology as approved by current standards of the country - he will not be fielding questions about his personal beliefs in the course of the hour. He is not a conventional Romuva worshipper, and that’s hardly appropriate for a scholarly take like this, is it? There’s something of a deflation in a number of the crowd, but not a person twitches to leave their seat.

Observations made in 50 minutes: Doctor Lecter is in his mid 40s, perhaps approaching 50s, and holds his shoulders back like it pains him to relax. He mentions a sister in his opening statements - younger, more precocious, more strict in her religious inclinations. He also mentions in brief his experiences with the rise and suppression of traditional Lithuanian religion in the 1970’s and 1980’s before the Singing Revolution in the sort of blase way that only people who have lived through hard times do.

Will wonders at that - what kind of difficulty drives a person to surgical practice, to pagan rites and solstice rituals that are divorced of would-be allies, and winning smiles while wearing loud plaid.

Doctor Lecter’s suit, as it merits a mention of its own is hard to look away from. Jacket, waistcoat, tapered pants, and what looks to be an ascot or scarf rather than a tie, pinned in place by a small silver stud. It’s not so much as to not be appropriate for his lecture, being very dark with just the racing of red through it, but it’s enough to ensure he’s the most visible thing on the stage, complimentary to clipped digital illuminated manuscripts and woven designs that intermingle with black and white photos.

Doctor Lecter has a predilection towards bad puns, the kind that break the ice and make everyone sit a little more comfortably in their seats. Not too comfortably though. He also is very cognizant of distraction - at least one unfortunate girl is given a raised eyebrow when her phone chirps with a text message, which prompts her to leave when the people on either side of her look vaguely dead inside at the possibility that he thinks it's them.

"Predestination," he says towards the beginning, "and the certainty of fate makes for zealots, and zealots do not fear a death that was always written in their hearts. Enter, the Northern Crusades and the assimilation of the Baltic Tribes under Mindaugas. Enter, Communism and the World Wars. Enter, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of modern capitalism, and still," he pauses and hisses into the vacuous hall, " *still* , here lie the zealots, unmarked by the intrusion of foreign powers, dead or alive by their own destinies. Diminished in numbers and sacred places, but primed to grow once more until the next challenge."

Will listens and watches this with a kind of attentiveness he doesn't very often feel these days - it's a relief to feel present in the tenor of the man's voice and his historical accounting of grisly things, and the recurring theme of the surety of death making war and social upheaval palatable.

That seems relatable. Predestination, he supposes, is fine. It's not like his blunt observations are all that different from it.

(*Self-fulfilling prophecies, really.*)

The close of the lecture is almost a disappointment with how warm his seat has become between the lowering of the lights and the end of the question segment, but the close of the lecture also brings Beverly standing and moving to the front with the same kind of surety that Doctor Lecter took the podium.

"Welcome back, Doctor Lecter," she says, pushing her hair back into something like order. The man turns with that same smile he gives the audience, assessing. "I heard you visited Doctor Du Maurier's office this afternoon, so I'm sorry I missed you there when there weren't as many people looking for your company. Do you have a minute? I'd like to ask some questions relative to our trip this summer."

Doctor Lecter bows his head in a slow nod - those words register as familiar, turning fully to meet her with a brilliant smile.

“Miss Katz,” he says, with that grand voice he teaches with. Her name sounds more dignified when spoken from his mouth; not the military child Will grows up with who eats Dr. Pepper peanuts between class periods, a habit picked up while stationed in Corpus Christi. “Your persistence is admirable. Here I was thinking you only liked me for the research funds,” he adds with a tease. “I was beginning to miss seeing your name in my inbox asking for an update.”

Beverly has the grace to look embarrassed, whereas Brian and Matthew shrug as though this is expected. (*It is - it’s funny to look at from here. Your own mentor, Professor Crawford, spends more time trying to get a straight answer out of* ***you*** *than you’ve ever considered asking for updates. Three months ago, you wondered if you were even going to complete the program.*)

Alana is gleaming with happiness, ready to cut in with her own natural affability. “I told you the emails were too much,” she says, giving Beverly a friendly shoulder tap before extending a hand. “I’m Alana Bloom, your cultural anthropology hanger-on for the summer. The one that opted for letter writing instead of refreshing their email semi-hourly.”

A huffing laugh to this - Doctor Lecter shakes her hand. Will notes in passing he has broad, veined hands, and between the fingers - tattoos. Glyphs of some sort in long streaming lines, almost unnoticeable save for the wide gap of his thumb over Alana’s hand, clasping her fingers like a nobleman rather than the business-like ones he gives Brian, Matthew, and Jimmy that follow after. A marked preference - maybe Doctor Lecter likes his graduate researchers blue-eyed, dark-haired, and classically beautiful.

Her fingernails are still ballerina pink. Will swallows around the awkward memory of holding them for himself.

Doctor Lecter’s head turns; it’s this that catches Will’s attention, missing something in the crossfire of words with the others. He’s looking at him, rather than Alana’s little pink-fingered hand, or Beverly doing her best to reign in a smile for the illusion of professionalism. There’s an air of expectation there.

(*“Y’answer me when I’m speakin’ t’you,” says Beau from across a kitchen counter. “Y’nod your head and say ‘yessir’.”*)

Will blinks slow, and lets his eyes trace the intersections of plaid beneath Doctor Lecter’s pocket square. The fabric is a checked cherry red damask, and bleeds out of the pocket in two pointed peaks. *Very distracting* , he thinks, *not at all where I’m supposed to look, but you put it there, so what else am I supposed to do?*

“This is Will,” says Alana, obliging to the last and now a bit pink in the face as well. “He’s not part of the program, but a lot of us share classes with him, and he’s Beverly’s roommate, so we thought he’d be interested in meeting the person he’s had to hear about all semester.”

Beverly’s friend, says she. Her poor choice in a boyfriend to coddle, says Will. Will thinks that thought must show, because the good doctor darts eyes between the two of them before settling directly on Will’s, uncomfortably bright and curious. That tiger at the edge of the yard, just as he’d thought on the damp walk over.

“I am obliged to meet any bystander to my long-windedness...goodness knows the administration gives me too much leeway, and my grantees are hardly going to do anything but sing praises. How did you find the topic, Will?” asks Doctor Lecter, placid and unbothered as the surface of a lake. Whatever he thinks of Will’s strange muteness, Will can’t find the truth of it in the planes of his face.

(*You found it comforting that death is inevitable. It’s nice to hear someone else say it for once. You don’t know about ancestral nihilism and how it applies to communism, but you like the parts about not giving a fuck about external factors because the internal ones are preset. It’s validating, honestly. You just wish you had been able to keep from thinking about his clothing* .)

“Enjoyable, except for the glare from the projector that kept pulling attention back to your suit instead of your slides,” Will blurts out, because it’s true, and it’s what he’s thinking.

Doctor Lecter laughs, sharp eye teeth at the corners of his mouth. “And how did you find my suit?” He doesn’t sound at all disconcerted.

“A kind of mimesis,” Will says. “Cryptic mimicry. Camouflage to make you look like something else.” He doesn’t even know what he means by it fully, only that Doctor Lecter, with his burning coal-bright eyes and nearly not there gestures looks at him, really looks at him like he’d like to peel back the skin and see how his veins tick underneath.

Beverly, however, gives a vaguely polite but agonized cough.

“I’m afraid the bystander has seen right through me after all,” Doctor Lecter says with a widening smile, turning to those around him to diffuse their discomfort at Will’s bluntness. “An interesting way to say I’m covering up for a boring personality.” asks Doctor Lecter, shrugging with hands up and an affable look, but Will lowers his eyes to focus on the tie pin instead. It was only a bright spot from the stage, but here up close, a small crescent moon. Another small detail, maybe something for himself instead of his shell, maybe a gift from someone. It has the same shape and quality as the glyphs hiding between the gaps in his fingers. Will finds he wants to look at them, and very nearly asks to see his hand.

(*You want to read his palm. What are the witch-doctor’s life lines? Does Jupiter reign in the index? Has intuition been folded into those tattoos?*)

“Hannibal, I see you found the resident skeptic,” says Alana’s overseeing professor, the condescending Doctor Chilton. “It’s a small comfort to know he doesn’t just save his smart comments for the local educators - I was beginning to think he was saving it for the psychology classes.”

Doctor (*Hannibal*) Lecter gives Professor Chilton the look of someone indulging a younger sibling, but not the one back home he seems to love. Will doesn’t think Professor Chilton catches that. The Doctor claps Will on the shoulder. “The study of the mind requires both intellect and a certain irreverence for existing guidelines if one is to progress our understanding of it,” he says. “I’m sure Will here is just challenging the occasional hole in the plot, as it were.”

“Mr. Graham is full of all sorts of sage advice,” Doctor Chilton huffs. “I’d hardly know he speaks were it not for the occasional doomsaying. He’s quite accurate with it, though. Called out one of my doctoral candidates on a lie that turned out to be true. An uncanny skill he refuses to have medically tested,” he adds, eyeing Will with the usual *malice-envy-curiosity* .

“Truth is less of a skill and more of a calling,” says Doctor Lecter, giving Will another considering look. “Words of wisdom are opportunities to be critical of our perceptions and decisions before we make mistakes. But perhaps I am laying the philosophy on a little thick. Your Mr. Graham and I have only just met, and his colleagues are quite patiently waiting for me to let them know what their summer looks like.”

It’s quite artful how easily he dismisses Chilton to turn back to Beverly, Alana and Jimmy, the other two having sat down in the auditorium to scroll through their phones and listen. He doesn’t even hesitate. Will shuffles awkwardly, a mirror to Chilton’s own discomfiture, before he finds Jimmy’s side, and keeps his eyes downward. They skitter between the ugly carpet running through the seats and the tips of Doctor Lecter’s hands, one in his suit jacket’s pocket and the other casual against his side.

The scrawl of black ink between his index finger and thumb is as vivid as any red mark on a paper - a correction. (*A correction to what?*)

Doctor Lecter talks to them for an additional ten minutes before the press of people surrounding them looking to get a word in starts to feel a bit oppressive. Even Beverly, normally completely unbothered by the idea of looking rude, begins to back away from the conversation after confirming some recommendations for research locations. There’s a persistent, stout man behind her that gets closer each time Doctor Lecter answers a question, like it’s merely an issue of his readiness to jump in, not that Beverly is a previous acquaintance and actively talking to him.

“Don’t want to hold you up any longer,” she concedes in defeat, Alana and Jimmy staring in anxious turns at the growing number of people queuing. “I know you’ve probably got plans tonight and every night you ever spend on this side of the Atlantic, but we’re going to meet up at our place tonight for wine and to strategize before the end of the semester and the graduate office hours get weird. You’re welcome to join.”

The inscrutable smoothness of Doctor Lecter’s face holds up, though Will senses a certain level of amusement at the offer. He likely hasn’t slummed it with the masters students in literal decades. “Yours and our academic outsider, Will?”

(*Ah yes, just what you wanted - scrutiny from unrelated third parties that don't know about how terrible this year started off. Let's take ivory tower potshots at the forensics guy.*)

"Only the finest of accommodations in mid-grade apartment housing," Will deadpans, hoping to discourage him. "George Washington University knows how to treat it's guests."

Another one of those smiles - reflexive, a learned reaction, something to set people at ease. It's a handsome face that's been cut to complete the image. "Certainly," says Doctor Lecter like it's a great joke. "Save me a glass, Miss Katz and Mr. Graham. It sounds like there's room in my schedule after all."

"Really?" asks Brian, perking up for once.

"I have no plans that can't be changed." He rolls his shoulders; *what can you do* , his eyes say, giving Will the briefest of bemused looks. So much for discouragement.

Beverly nods, excited, but also a little green with the gauntlet thrown and picked up. She hadn't expected him to accept. He wouldn't have if Will kept his mouth shut.

"Giving up a good dinner in exchange for lounging in second-hand furniture and supermarket wine?" asks Will. "Truly, a man of the people on either shore of the Atlantic. Hope it's worth the heartburn," he shrugs with a half-smile of his own.

"On the contrary, I am very glad to make your acquaintance and meet with your compatriots," says the Doctor. "Discovering new people and ensuring a good research trip circuit is hardly a chore."

Will feels very humbled near him and all his finery in the long walkway between the chairs, audience emptying out while bashful students jockey for his attention on either side. He is, nonetheless, unerringly fixed on Will and continues. "I find myself charmed by Frederick's comments," he says, head turning just the slightest, gaze searching once more. "Perhaps we can find some more of those wise words in you yet."

The wine stain on the couch is glaring next to Alana's pretty black and white windowpane skirt, tucked next to a pale leg and petite foot in a matching red. He had told Beverly that a white couch, even thrifted, was a bad investment. Just imagine if someone was to do something more substantial to its aging upholstery. Watching a doctor multiple times over eye it for the briefest of moments before smiling is almost as mortifying as spilling the wine was.

He hates it when people can see his mistakes. He doesn't know if it was his, but the stain's persistence makes it his by inheritance. Like old houses with nowbloodied carpets, he thinks with a smile and no laugh.

Doctor Lecter, despite finding himself in the kind of disjointed but comfortable apartment that a couple of graduate students can piece together on waiting tables and data entry as jobs, holds his wine glass that came with a wine tasting as though it were the finest crystal. It's the nicest of the ones he and Beverly own - maker's mark, sparkling clean, and unmarred as a top shelf item. They don't typically spend a lot on basics; tonight they try and make up for it in the wine itself, something gifted to Beverly by her parents when she graduates from her undergraduate program.

(*"If the most exclusive and cited professor of your field of study comes to town and you don't think that's worth cracking open the reserve cabernet, I don't really know when is," she says, twisting the bottle opener. You nod, but flinch at each turn of the corkscrew* - squeak, squeak, squeeeeak - *like it's driving straight into your tongue to pull it out.*)

(*"We can find some of those wise words in you yet," you hear repeat.*)

The man is patient, holding court more than having a drink with a group of researchers that he has made exceptions for. He stays away from business once their itineraries are settled, and names are given, and assurances of what they do and don't need.

"Come hungry," he says at one point. "While we're hardly the gourmet capital of Northern Europe, the rites during our week of solstice don't neglect traditional fare, and we're not the type to leave food on the table," and ends on an amused roll of the shoulders when Brian asks facetiously if that's before or after the sacrificial offerings.

“Oh, those happen throughout,” comes the smooth reply.

He leads a surprisingly relatable life when he’s in the United States. Doctor Lecter talks of spending winters in Baltimore, and taking the train into New York City for the museums and the lights, and the very different way Christmas and the New Year are celebrated in comparison to home. “A sobering tradition by comparison in Vilnius, or in Utena near my home. We have the lights, the bright paper, the gifts, but lack the rather exuberant commercialism of the United States and parts of western Europe.”

Will licks his lips, chewing at the corner until there’s bright pain.

(*Do they have the tinsel trees in Vilnius? Do they have the bolt-action rifles, and the chasm of years trying to straddle the fence of being in someone’s life? “You shouldn’t think so hard,” you say, and it feels less like advice to your Daddy, and more so advice to yourself today in May.*)

“Not something you celebrate though, right? Given the neo-paganism?” Matthew jabs with a smile. Alana scolds him, and tells him not to be an insensitive smart ass, but Doctor Lecter takes this statement in stride, someone well accustomed to answering.

“Paganism, for all that the name is globally being reclaimed, differentiates us from Christianity as something savage, base perhaps,” he says, looking into the glass. “We have practiced our arts before the Christians came to be, and I suspect long after.” But he smiles again, something secretive and amused. “But we take in our...shall we say adopted Christian brothers’ holidays as is common. One hates to forego a government holiday in the name of hard-headedness.”

“Besides,” he continues, “I find our rites for the solstice far more befitting my preferences, every bit as decadent and decorated, but without the shiny marketing.”

Alana nods shyly, so clearly wanting to interject - this is her field of interest after all, and a competent older man (*without your obsessiveness, without your wild mouth*) is sharing. An aperitif for this trip to Lithuania, he guesses, and tries to tamp down envy as one tamps down coffee grounds for a press - into something bitter, best served in daylight hours by yourself.

“Tradition makes for more interesting holidays,” Doctor Lecter adds. “Something made special by the presence of your family and the things that stay precious in your homes,” he takes a considering sip of the wine, and licks his lips. “We have maintained worship of the sun and the moon rather than thunder and earth, and you’ll find our traditions very different from the secular vision of our religion, hence my hesitation when speaking to address it. Unique, my colleagues like to assert. Were I without my sister for any length of time for these days, I would be very grieved, as she knows best what I understand to be important.”

“I assume you’re not making gingerbread cookies,” says Matthew.

Doctor Lecter smiles into his glass. “Indeed, no. Nine meals to the day, all things matched in threes as we can. I will hardly complain about finishing out the night in a sauna to reflect on the coming new year or a bottle of mead while I am at it.”

“No joke?” Beverly laughs. “Beats the shit out of arguing about the internal temperature of a ham. What’s the summer like if winter’s not the main event?”

The main event. Crescendo to the composition.

“A celebration of family,” Doctor Lecter says. “Duties to our ancestors. Thankfulness for the sun’s gifts, and providing gifts in turn that match Hers.”

It all sounds very nice - a toasty hall in some icy land that knows its children better than America knows hers. Ornaments and activities are purposeful, not a memory of something you’re supposed to do, because that’s what you’ve been told is correct and good. Go to church on Christmas Eve, eat Chinese food because it’s open and it’s cheap and Daddy doesn’t pretend to be good at making feasts, much less nine meals.

Will wilts more into the wall, the chipped glass of wine drawing in closer and closer to his chest, trying to slip away. He doesn’t have meaningful rituals to share, while the others do - they were never a Christmas ham kind of household. There’s no mistletoe in the doorways of elderly bachelors for Will to grow up with. Had he known he wouldn’t have a father to pass Christmas with after the last one, Will would have been better prepared to grieve days without him the way that Doctor Lecter grieves ones without his sister.

(*“No,” says Daddy. “Nothin’ special this year.”*)

He wilts until he is small, and the safety of the fluorescent lights of the kitchen are a harbor for his discomfort. It’s an ache, pulsing behind his eyes. It feels good to hear everyone fade into the background murmuring in confidences, hidden by a wall between the living room and a concertina slatted door.

Will throws up the reserve cabernet into the sink, because now is as good a time as any. It’s very dark, even on the scuffed white porcelain, but nobody saw him do it, so it may as well have not happened.

Will assumes it’s Alana or Beverly that will check on him at some point - pita chips and what passes for their shoestring version of fancy cheese plate will need replenishing at some point, even if their esteemed guest has eaten exactly none of it, but given polite praise and some trivia on the wine region that has been brought to the coffee table tonight. He doesn’t really want to be caught dry heaving by Doctor Lecter, but of course it’s him that folds the door open and closed when he hears it shift.

He doesn’t really sense the man’s approach initially - his fingernails are white at the unclean edges of the kitchen sink, tap running hot water until it steams into his face and empties the basin. Will doesn’t even think to raise his head from the billow of hot air until a tentative hand puts two fingers to his shoulder, and the other reaches to turn off the sink. The sensation of muffled talking - he shakes his head and looks up.

“Sorry,” Will says with a wince. “Every party needs an ugly drunk.”

Doctor Lecter gives a half-smile and steps away when Will straightens up, embarrassed to be caught here. “I’d normally agree,” he replies. “But you aren’t drunk. I daresay you haven’t drank much of anything this evening at all. Are you feeling alright?”

(*Not for some time. Do you just tell people that, or is that obnoxious?*)

“Not feeling particularly celebratory or festive, no offense to you or your program. Just here as the roommate and resident wallflower.” Will diffuses a growing sense of stagnant frustration by loading cups into the dishwasher, clearing spaces. This isn’t the mess he really wants to show guests, and this one he can control in geometric placements and pine-scented detergent.

Doctor Lecter resolutely doesn’t take the hint. Instead he stares for what feels like a short eternity, but can’t be more than five seconds. He considers Will’s long arms dripping from the sink, pouring out old glasses of water. He looks on and on at this, like there’s something written in the tight knuckles of his hands.

“Miss Bloom tells me you’ve had some troubles with your Christmas, Will,” he says quite gently.

“Tonight?” Will asks, simmering in his skin.

He’s not sure how he should feel about that - oh, he’s angry certainly, but isn’t it fair warning? *Sorry about Will,* she would say, walking up the damp sidewalk from the street parking to the narrow path to the stairs and the door front. *He’s very bright, and I fancied myself able to fix him at one point, but there’s some screws loose in his head. Knocked them clear out of place before Santa could come down the chimney.*

“Alana shouldn’t go telling random lecturers outside my program about my troubles,” he mutters, hands seeking out a rag to work at a spot on a mug. “Or, fuck, even lecturers **in** my program about my Christmas troubles,” says Will, head down to cover the way his eyes want to blink, over and over again, clearing tears, fog, anger, twitching hateful anger.

Another observation - Doctor Lecter’s long looks are heavy. How many people did he have to stare down and give terrible news to during his time as a trauma surgeon? How many Beau Graham’s did he see on a shift during Christmas? Maybe he can’t bear being away from his sister around those times because it means being around more Will Grahams, and seeing more Beau Grahams.

“I understand that burden...it’s a transformative thing to witness,” says Doctor Lecter, once a bar of time has passed, safe to make noise again. “ I watched both my parents die as a young boy. The Communist Party was not kind to them and their more esoteric traditional practices. Paganism was a useful tool on the road to atheism for them, until it was not. ”

Will feels his face drain a bit - he hasn’t had to answer to this kind of rebuttal before. No so sorry, they didn’t mean to pry. Here’s someone that’s seen worse, and Will honestly doesn’t have a response to that.

Doctor Lecter waves a hand when Will licks his lips to apologize. “A thing that has long passed. My father was quite insistent that we were to celebrate Rasos that year in a particular style, similar to how we will this June, my twelfth and my sister’s sixth, and a man in the neighborhood sought to increase his fortunes by ruining the week for everyone with a well-placed call. On our feasting day, we didn’t trade blessings so much as bullets.”

Will has only ever seen one bullet, used as such, and effectively as such.

(*You ignore hunting whitetails in the forest, the gambling of game birds on the rare autumn trip to the Smokies with your father. You didn’t do those often enough to consider it a tradition. You couldn’t get past the lump in your throat when you raised the scope, and not only did the bird not go down, it sailed onward, streaming feathers with a shrill cry. “Told you I’d miss,” you said.*)

“I’m sorry,” says Will, feeling like it’s wasted to say so.

“I’m not,” says Doctor Lecter. “I’m what I am today as a result of it. I like what I am, and I like where it has brought me,” he says with an easy lean into the counter behind him. “Today, that leads me to your kitchen.”

“How did you get over it?” Will asks, quietly.

“Fellowship is important. You find someone new to sit with for the blessings before dinner,” says Doctor Lecter, like it’s that simple. “My sister is a constant. Our guests and our members from year to year change, but they remind me how fleeting our time here is.”

“No crying over spilt milk,” Will nods, head hurting again. He’ll have little blood spots from vomiting in his cheeks, ersatz freckles. “It must be nice to have someone that understands that.”

(*“Stand up, you’s fine,” says the man that’s pulled you off the ground every time you’ve tripped on the docks, or knocked a knee. He’d be embarrassed by your emotionality.*)

Will shrugs, risking a glance at the door. “They...don’t really understand it,” he finds himself saying, counting slats in the wood, the gaps between where the apartment maintenance has failed to paint it. There’s the buzz of conversation somewhere beyond. His eyes burn and waver. “Lots of talk about what I couldn’t possibly know, how it’s...not my fault, my father was hurting. But I did know. I knew since before I went to college, maybe even before high school. Told him he better find something to do with himself once when I was angry, that I didn’t feel like cleaning his messes off the floor.”

Doctor Lecter sits on that for a moment. Will stares at the ground, determined to keep the screaming dread sitting in his throat from coming out again. He has nothing left to throw up. No baths when there’s company, he finds himself thinking. *Not very adult of you, not very good coping skills* . He’s further surprised to feel the rub of a rough thumb underneath each eye at the soft skin there, wiping the burning scratch of tears away.

“Sorry, sorry,” he says, fists coming up to scrub his face himself. “I’m fine, I’m sorry you even know about it.” He tries to push away the other man’s hands with wet ones of his own. He’s not five years old. He didn’t scrape his knee - he can handle this. Will’s not as bothered by the intrusion as he thinks he should be, but it’s been so long since someone checked up on him. Resistance is customary.

“I think I like it better when you just thought I was a random bystander,” he sighs.

Doctor Lecter isn’t easily rebuffed, with the kind of fussing one expects of a parent rather than a teacher. His thumbs come down to clasp at clammy wrists, and Will feels the warm pressure against the fine bones there. The strange tracery of glyphs looks even starker in the cold-white-blue of the fluorescents lights, crossing runes, shapes, and stars at home in the skin. They look like the dark blue of veins almost, native as a birthmark or a scar. He gives

just the faintest of squeezes, and this time Will slowly pulls his hands back to lean against the kitchen counter, mouth stiff and eyes squinted to take control of his face once more.

He nods. “As you gathered this afternoon, I’m not a believer in randomness. I like this Will as much as the one our esteemed Professor Chilton gives backhanded compliments to. I was meant to meet him.”

(*You see now there’s a three pointed fork at the apex of his thumb and index finger - you still feel its tines scratch the tendons of your wrist.*)

“I often speak of fatalism in seminars,” Doctor Lecter continues, still leaning against the other side of the galley kitchen, as casual as it was his own. “It’s a philosophy that resonates with me, where the other pageantry doesn’t always. It’s healthy to be skeptical of burning sage at every doorway, or having a deity for every event in nature,” he says with a smirk. “But I do appreciate fate’s godly face, something quite beyond science. She is called Laima, and what she speaks becomes truth, and it is unalterable once spoken. A god, yes, but bound by her own proclamations as strongly as any man. We revere her for giving purpose to children and blessing mothers.”

“No take backsies once a goddess says you’re a mediocre farmer or a coal miner?” Will smiles tightly.

Doctor Lecter gives another one of his elegant shifts of the shoulders, smiling with his hands now hidden by the suitjacket’s pockets. “So too can you not unsee or understand what you observe, and your experiences with people are shaped by it. Perhaps you have Laima’s eyes in some way, and knowledge chases after. A painful gift.”

“That’s a nice way to comfort someone who should know better than to say the quiet part out loud.”

“Nonsense, I find the quiet part to be the one least listened to or celebrated,” he says. “An Ophelia or Cassandra, filled with quiet dread. You give people fair warning - what they do with that is their stone to roll.”

Will gives a weak laugh, hands still wringing at his face. “I don’t know if that makes it better.”

“ *You must wear your rue with a difference* ,” quotes Doctor Lecter. Will can hear the smile in it. “Forgive me Will, I’m afraid I am getting old and rather struck by the theatre of beautiful tragic youths.”

Will gives a snort, and goes to rub his face again, which has gone tacky with his smeared tears, but is drying now. He can pull his armor back on, tight to his body, make his eyeballs into glass, his tongue fluid and moving again instead of stuck to the roof of his mouth.

“Shall we rejoin them?” asks Doctor Lecter, as though he understands Will’s shift. “I was just about to go over some of the particulars for the summer solstice. Being both the grant sponsor and the host makes for a workload both on the teacher’s lectern and in the student’s preparations.”

“Ah,” says Will, feeling the edge of this conversation with his voice, the way he learned to with Beverly when this topic comes up. (*“No hard feelings,” you think, “but this has nothing to do with me and I don’t have the bandwidth for much more than eating, breathing, and corpse flies!”*) “I’m not on that grant. I might just go wash my face, so please don’t worry about me.”

“I rather think I’d like you to listen to it all the same,” the other man insists, and at Will’s raised brow, raises his own hand to gesture with the wave of a hand. “Your colleague Mr. Price has opted out, and left me with a gap in the seating arrangements. Mischa will be very upset with me if I don’t fill it.”

“You...what, want me to go on a research trip for a program that I’m not actually enrolled in? Because your sister will take umbrage at the wrong guest count?”

“Oh, the numbers are significant. We can’t just leave gaps in the table settings,” says Doctor Lecter, like he’s said something funny. “I’ll have to find someone I like less to be there. Think of it as an experience and a favor to me.”

“I’ll think about it,” Will concedes, and opens the kitchen to the room beyond, the concertina of the doors creaking as each joint closes.

(*You don’t want to say the wrong thing. You don’t want to go. You do, but you can’t because that ruins it for everyone else right? It has nothing to do with you, but most things don’t, so at what point do you accept that and try to find excuses to not die alone in your living room?*)

The temptation to stalk into his own bathroom and disappear into a cloud of shower steam is almost too much, but he finds his way back into the living room with a sour stomach and a glass of water, ignoring curious looks. His cheeks are probably splotchy, and his eyes tend to go greener from the red of the whites from crying, but he’s calm. He can fake a smile again, and engage questions with more than a hum.

Back to Christmas traditions, and entirely healthy family units, even Doctor Lecter’s who, despite the admission of his own grisly holiday, can talk about his sister and community with ease. Back to entirely normal conversations between acquaintances that should upset no one.

Doctor Lecter doesn’t generally go very far from him, though at no point does he draw attention back to Will either, content to write off their little sliver of time in the kitchen as merely “chewing the fat” of something other than academic pursuits. If anyone suspects otherwise, they either have grace enough to never mention it, or they honestly don’t care. The best flight routes to Vilnius and the best places to stay in Kaunas are the topics at hand, and is it worth visiting Kaliningrad Oblast, and are the beaches of the west coast very cold in summer, and-and-and...

It’s raining again when Doctor Lecter leaves, but it smells warm outside, water leeching into the grass at the edges of the old apartment complex, the slick brick edifice and stairs glowing in the streetlights. It doesn’t look so bad from out here - just another long building in a row of long buildings in the heart of Columbia Heights. It was kind of Doctor Lecter to make the trip this far north from the campus.

Beverly and Will see everyone out just before midnight, Matthew and Alana begging off to ride the Metro before it gets too late, and Doctor Lecter on his way up to Baltimore tomorrow. Will walks to the curb where Doctor Lecter’s cab hasn’t quite arrived, keeping him

company in the canopy of the sidewalk trees and a ratty old telescoping umbrella that never shuts quite right. The doctor, not being a sartorial failure like Will, has a perfectly functioning red one, balanced open on his shoulder where a few beads of misty rain have caught on his shoulder.

They stand in relative silence, a couple of cars passing, before at last Doctor Lecter turns his head, angular faced in the dark like a statue.

“You should come, Will,” says Doctor Lecter, taking in the curves of Will’s face by contrast, something waxy and white these days. “To Lithuania, now that you’ve heard all the plans. Consider yourself my guest rather than a party to your friends’ research trip.”

“They don’t really want me there,” he says.

“But I do, and that’s rather more important to me, as it’s my house,” comes the reply with a sly smile. He reaches into his breast pocket and fishes out a business card - that same rolling sequence of titles, ***Professor Hannibal Lecter, MD PhD, Vilnius University Chair of Lithuanian Studies, Johns Hopkins University Professor Emeritus of Surgical Medicine*** , all much too prestigious for weird forensic biology and forensic profiling graduate student Will Graham, who’s never bothered to give a business card out, no matter that he’s entitled to five hundred free ones from the university year over year.

“They are coming as observers,” Doctor Lecter adds. “It’s selfish of me, but I would prefer your sharp mouth to their critical eyes. I would be honored to show you how it improved my life to be a part of my family’s beliefs, despite how my responsibility for maintaining them came to be.”

Will looks a long time at the white of the card, crisp serif fonts for emails and phone numbers for public inquiries. People would never know the owner was an orphan with all that clean professional space. Trauma reduced to nothing in distinguishments and cardstock. It’s heartening - maybe he can disappear someday like that, if he learns the trick.

“Sleep well, Will,” says Doctor Lecter when the cab rolls up, comfortable with his silence. “Never hesitate to reach out to me. I do hope you’ll contact me or my assistant though.”

Will nods, and watches the car lights disappear down the street when the traffic light sends them on their way towards the east bank of the Potomac. He stands there a while longer even after it's long gone, closing the umbrella and letting the sooty rain water of the city wash away the itch from around his eyes.

Will doesn't go to bed as much as he falls into a chasm from the underside of his bed. The sheets open up into somewhere else, no longer tidily tucked at the corners of an aging mattress, edges safely closed from the outside. He gasps and gasps in his sleep, because that's what he should have done the first time this scene unfolded.

He is cold, because the tinsel tree is glittering in the living room of his Daddy's house, with the front door swung open, and even in the South the winter is chilly and hard on naked hands and feet. He thinks he was trying to be gracious, letting people in to help, or to spectate. There's a lot to look at. He'd appreciate it if someone can confirm what he sees.

Beau is trying to say something from the floor, but his tongue has nothing to cleave to at the back of his throat because he's blown it out like he's shooting cans on a fence, so it wetly pushes against the absences there. Will watches it slide between his perfect teeth, the one thing genetics did right by him *(though the splatter hanging out at the gum line from the wound rather ruins them - damned if you do, damned if you don't, right Will?*). The whites of his father's eyes lolling and trying to find him somewhere in the room. Even death doesn't keep him from working at it.

Will is on the floor next to him, wet as though he's just stepped out of the shower, fully clothed. He doesn't seem to be injured, but he can't really get up, and his head aches sympathetically. He rolls as a child does on the carpet, hiding at the edges of furniture, listening for voices down the hall to find him. The red lights from the ambulance are flashing on the old wood-panel walls of the cottage house, turning the ugly olive green carpet brown with each pass, but maybe that's the blood. It's all mute - not a person to be seen, no blue uniforms of police or paramedics, nobody helping even though Will's not dead yet, just watching.

"I told you," he says, and the air fogs from his mouth, because no matter how cold he is on the outside, he is made of warm meat on the inside, and he is full of fiery things that come from somewhere inside and bang on the walls until they are set free.

(*You used to think of cigarette smoke as something escaping instead of blown out. Your parents set themselves on fire inside, and some people make it out alive, while others don't. You were afraid to start smoking all the way up to high school, even if you recognize now that there's a difference between Daddy's Marlboros, and your long gone mother's heroin.*)

But the air fogs more thickly behind his head, and for a terrible moment Will thinks perhaps the back of his neck and skull are gone too - he's narrow enough that the caliber of the Remington can do it. He won't take an extra 11 minutes to properly die. Will absently reaches for it, panicked when he doesn't immediately catch the curling brown hair he remembers being there, but finds something hard and bristled instead.

Will rolls his head - fog steams in his face, something rotten smelling, and it's not an exit wound, but a massive elk instead, standing at his side, snout to the ground, antlers branching over him as empty as the maple trees outside on the lawn. Each point is a knife - each breath a wave over his face.

(*You shot a deer once - watched with a blank look when you were encouraged by rougher handed men to grab it by the rack and pose, as though that wasn't morbid. They told you to crouch down, and all you wanted to do was shove its tongue back into its mouth and apologize. They made chili from its remains, and you were still trapped in your head in the field between the oaks, holding its horns.*)

There's a question, somewhere in its black eyed gaze.

"It's not the work that kills you, it's the thinking," he explains, gesturing a clammy hand over to Beau. It seems fair it's still standing, while he and Daddy are hemorrhaging from somewhere unseen. Turnabout is fair play, or something.

He doesn't know if it understands, only that it moves to stand over him, and lies in the space between him and his father, antlers in doppler between the tinsel trees lights and the spinning red of the emergency cars outside. Each leg dropping to the ground is a boulder, it's chest is a building falling, rattling the floor boards and the crawlspace beneath the house. Beau's hand twitches weakly beneath it's bulk, trapped.

Will cards his fingers in the thick fur near it's nape, meaning to rise and look to see if Beau's still there on the other side, but he knows he is, and instead he lets himself lie limply on his side, fingers gone missing in the black fur and mess of feathers, inky as the blood.

Morning comes with the certainty of bricks on his chest - each rib tight, and Will heaves in air while the digital clock on his bedside ticks away in flashing red.

(*The strobing of the ambulance, the long lines of horns. You're on the floor reaching past the sticky wetness of the carpet, but can't get any further than the heaving bulk of an elk.*)

His head is still whole. He knows because Will reaches back to check it, fingers tracing the cording muscle at the back of his neck, whorled with fine hairs.

It's 3:45 am, and it's too early for Will to justify getting up, even if his feet just want to hit the pavement until he finds his car and can take off down south to the freeways, and the green rural expanses between here and his Daddy's now sold house. He's never regretted selling it all the way up to getting the final check for it. The nagging need to look at the living room again is something he'll have to just forget. There's plenty of police case files with washed-out pictures of (*the crime scene*) what happened. No giant deer. No sympathetic head wounds, laying side by side and emptying out.

He wouldn't recognize it with the new laminate floors, and white walls, and the small healthy three-person family that moved in anyways.

When it's light enough outside the windows to see the sun glow on the expanse of his wall, Will gets up, pours himself a bowl of wheat flake cereal, and chews absently between thoughts and spoonfuls of milk and dried strawberries. None of it really tastes like anything, but it's breakfast time, and the hours must properly be observed. At the round kitchenette table of the apartment, he can survey the empty green glass bottles from the night before, and

the red wine rings left on the table top. He doesn't bother to clean them before eating - it's probably stained anyway.

This ambivalence chases him into a couple more thoughts of varying importance. Beverly will be hungover today. He's supposed to meet Alana for lunch this weekend and keep her company while she looks for some good lightweight summer clothing for the trip. Doctor Lecter is likely already halfway up the Metro line to Baltimore for his morning meeting at Johns Hopkins, no doubt wearing another disguise for his curious disposition.

(*Do you think it's personal erasure of the image of a traumatized Soviet child using exacting tailored lines, or is it that the flamboyant fabric is to distract from some other peculiarity? "I'm not a believer in randomness," he had said, so what is the purpose this time?*)

Chasing this thought, another: Will has been invited to go to Europe, like everyone else, with the distinguishment of a guest rather than a witness. He thinks he is going to accept.

Will chews the cereal, and takes another bite. Everything works - tongue meets hard palate, teeth embrace, nutrition taken in and down and not through the back of the upper vertebrae to spill down the back of his shirt. All's well that ends well.

It's really quite simple, when Will thinks about it. He can agonize about this up until the last minute, or make up his mind and get on to the next agony. There's nothing on his schedule for the summer, and nobody's responsible for him keeping it together. If anyone has anything that they want to say about it, Will's the only one invited personally, not as a scholar. A different type of participant. He's not entirely sure Doctor Lecter isn't just being polite, or maybe he feels a kinship through Will's private disaster that's always unfolding publicly. Looking for an opportunity to do for someone else what wasn't done for him.

Will distrusts it's that simple, but Will doesn't want to knock around the apartment by himself for a month while Beverly's gone either. He doesn't know what to do with all that empty space - he might as well fill his head with things somebody else finds valuable than to pour out the rest of his own.

Decision made, now the times call for action, like opening a bedroom door. He gets the business card from his jeans pocket in his bedroom, and shoots off what he sees as an inconsequential, and probably overly casual email to Doctor Lecter.

Thanks for -

(*Are you thankful for having someone spectate one of your meltdowns within five hours of meeting you? Imagine what Doctor Crawford would say in the same circumstances. He would have dropped you from the program for the future basketcase risk that you are.*)

Doctor Lecter,

Thanks for talking with me last night. It couldn't have been comfortable bringing up your own history when you came over expecting moderately bad wine and overenthusiastic researchers. With any luck the night was productive for you.

I thought about your invitation. If you were-

(*Honest, not just being polite, not just feeling sorry for you, not just reliving something that is still fresh to you but a million years past to him, and thinking he can heal you-*)

If you were still ok with your recommendation of going on the trip during the summer break, I'd be interested in going. I don't think I'd be able to come for the full three weeks like the rest of the European Studies team, but the nine day traditional week for the holiday sounds like a nice change of pace.

Please don't feel obligated - I know the circumstances around the invite were a little-

(*Unprofessional, pathetic, unbecoming of a forensic researcher-*)

I know the circumstances around the invite were a little irregular, and I completely understand that it's a family event, not just a seminar or conference for people to gawk at. I do appreciate that you tried to include me.

-Will

It looks a bit anemic from the phone's draft screen - not something he'd feel entirely comfortable sending off to a visiting lecturer in his own field of study, and certainly not on the level of asking for permission to stay at a family estate in an isolated commune in the Baltic Sea's eastern cradle. If it's not enough, Will at least has the satisfaction of knowing he tried to step outside of his comfort zone. He sends it, and flips the phone over so he can't see what happens after.

The dried strawberries are tangy if he tries to focus on them, but otherwise he continues chewing mindlessly, listening to cars on the street, and Beverly's shower running.

Doctor Lecter, pagan revivalist from rural Lithuania or not, doesn't leave his emails unread and unanswered for long. By mid-morning, Will has an email notification on his phone, and a strange sinking sensation. He expects a polite refusal, but receives a very frank response instead that makes him feel heavy and important.

Will,

I was entirely in earnest. That you know the difference between observing personal traditions and observing a topic for a thesis paper is reason enough for me. Consider your name written for your chair. You were meant to be there, and I won't hear protests otherwise.

Contact my assistant for more details on travel and the itinerary, as the grant was written to allow for a certain number of researchers rather than specific ones. I will oversee your education on the subject when you arrive. You needn't feel tied to your friends, though I will certainly understand if you'd like to remain close to them. Travel abroad can be quite disorienting.

Keep your eyes open and your words thoughtful, and I'm sure no trouble will find you before our next meeting in Vilnius.

Iki pasimatymo, Will.

- Hannibal

If Will feels a bit shy at the first name signature, he doesn't say anything about it. Maybe he's in a hurry, and the whole kit and caboodle with the doctorates and titles is a bit much to think about between train stations. Maybe it's a European thing. Odds are good it's automatically added by a phone, or by an email program. After all, Will signed with his too.

It's a good thing that Doctor Lecter has an unshakeable faith in Will's attendance, because everyone else's feelings on the situation almost have him hang in the towel on principle.

Breaking it to Beverly is easy, because Beverly has likely always had some hesitations about leaving Will with no one to be accountable to, and asking her parents to check in on him feels intentionally intrusive in a way that makes the (*loneliness, drifting, indecision, unhappiness*) obviousness of Will's not being okay feel too close. Can't properly leave the country if you think there's something grievously wrong with your roommate, right?

"I'm going to go," he tells Beverly the evening after getting his email over a cup of tea in the ugly brown mug, the one he took from a diner job years back.

"To....the library?" she asks over her own cup of coffee. She looks puzzled, eyes a little dark around the edges and her hair mussed. She doesn't really leave the house on the days after house parties, and her grading is done, so that's as good as permission to be an undergraduate again herself.

"To Lithuania," he says. "Doctor Lecter invited me to take Jimmy's spot in the attendance roster for the solstice week - something about the number of people at the table being significant. Consider this a courtesy notice," he adds, and takes a sip of the tea. "I know you guys are a little burnt out on me, so I'll do my best to keep to myself."

“Well, that’s...great. That’s great, Will,” she says with a smile that looks static.

Alana is noticeably less pacified on the weekend for their scheduled shopping trip. Will is half-heartedly looking over long-sleeved white wool shirts in the men’s section, trying to think of ways to bring up the subject with her when she appears at his side, holding hangers of clothes like a buffer between them.

“Beverly told me,” she says, with nothing to segue. That's ok - Will knows anyway. “That you’re coming to Lithuania for part of the trip. Are you sure that’s something you want to do?”

“It’s generally expected of people accepting invitations that they would actually like to be in attendance,” he says, holding out a button-up plaid in front of him with no real intentions of buying it. It’s black and green, kind of like Doctor Lecter’s suit, but not enough so to be recognizably so. He could benefit from a little public camouflage himself. (*Does assumed hero worship count?*) “Kind of defeats the purpose of being able to decline on an RSVP, and I hardly said yes when he asked initially. Gave him a way out and the whole nine yards, if that makes you feel better about it.”

“You don’t need to feel obligated,” she counters. “Doctor Lecter is probably serious about having a specific attendance count, but you don’t have to go if it’s not something you’re interested in.

“I don’t feel obligated.” he says. He buys the stupid plaid, and a lightweight backpack, and travel toiletries, to drive home how very not obligated he feels.

(*You feel picked first. You don’t say so, because that’s something she doesn’t want to hear, and you’re afraid to put it out there in case it’s hurtful. Not to you, but to her, and Beverly, and all the people that dearly wanted the prestige of this, while your confluence of a mouth that can’t stop talking just flows into someone else’s waters, greedy to become part of a sea.*)

The ticket for the flight isn't an insubstantial sum, but selling houses makes for a hefty chunk of money to waste. It's easier to waste in the middle of the night, as things often are.

(*You paid off the credit cards, Daddy's overdue taxes, one of your student loans, and to comfortably sink into your head rather than have to go into work. Everybody understands, and says to "take time for yourself". "You deserve some personal leave." "Do something that makes you happy."*)

Despite the price, it doesn't have a lot of weight, looking at it on a laptop screen. He gets an email receipt, and a request to fill out his passport information when he can, but it's not as if he has something he can hold on to. The idea of spending the summer in Europe is as far away as the idea of driving back home to Mobile, Alabama. Doctor Lecter's assistant, a nice young lady named Jurgita, told Will to send her the receipt to issue a refund to him, but Will doesn't think he will. It's nice being without accountability or debt. He can go on the merit of being invited, and wash down all the apologetic attempts to dissuade him.

(*"Travel is great for healing," says Alana, "but wouldn't you rather go somewhere that means something to you?"*)

He rolls into bed, and sleeps until he finds his way to the floorboards of the living room and the ugly brown carpet, the solid permanence of Beau Graham beside him. The elk, he thinks, is just behind the tree, content tonight to let Will grow into the fibers beneath him.

that keeps the obsequies so strict

They’re not the kind of group of people to see each other off to the airport unless someone asks for a ride. As one of the few with a car, Will is the de facto designated driver typically between the girls, and occasionally for Jimmy who offers a proliferation of specialty snacks and beers from his collection in exchange, which is a very fine currency to him. (*If you were the sort to consume beyond practicality, you might understand Jimmy 's values better, but you don’t. You’re not low-brow, you’re just uncomplicated that way. You certainly weren’t starved as a child, Beau would be mortified to be accused of it, even in death, but you also never saw the value in buying the next thing up from the necessary, same as him. You can either make it better yourself, or you can make due.*)

Will doesn’t accept them of course - he doesn’t charge the girls, and he doesn’t charge Jimmy, and that’s as fair and even as a Will Graham concept of equality gets.

Beverly, already fanatically committed to the three weeks abroad over the summer, spends the first week of June staying with her parents in Pensacola, making the correct noises of filial piety, and holding up appearances. They never quite make the jump from Louisiana to Maryland to be closer to their daughter, but they crave her attention, whereas she craves to be anywhere else. They joke from time to time when they come up to visit that they expect her to elope and move to the Canary Islands, or become an astronaut to leave the planet entirely. “Should have been in the Air Force or the Navy,” her father, an aging Vietnam vet who is proud but never quite sure where he sits with her. “Can’t travel much further away than that.”

(*“Listens to the ham all day, rather talk to buddies in Guam at 2 am than talk to mom,” Beverly says once upon a time on the high school track course, you and her walking in slow circles. It’s the kind of thing you were familiar with, that benign neglect. You shared that sensation with her. She distances herself from it. You poked it periodically with trips home.*)

Alana, by contrast, is incredibly close with her family, but secretive about her preferences and questioning nature. Will’s halfway thought he was intended to be a facade to send in texts and posts online to push the burden of their well-meaning scrutiny away, an adventurous daughter

that they'd like to see *settle down* , *think about the future* . Will finishes that thought with the assumption that six months time and emotional intimacy make it clear Will is a hard-sell for either of those things: resentful of single parent, misanthropic, not understanding of weekend trips to see the aunts and uncles, likes bugs, likes dead things that bugs eat because it's kinetically efficient to eat readily available meat. It's probably a relief to both of them when she ends it kindly, or as kind as she can be while Will mentally tears down drafts of plans that he shouldn't have made around someone.

Despite this difference in dependencies between the two women, it's Alana that ends up needing the ride. Will, despite a chilly week or two following his decision to attend the trip, doesn't mind. The bus doesn't leave early enough for her to catch her flight in time, and Will is hardly hurting for time and things to do with Beverly already gone. He closes the door to her room and keeps it shut - he still feels the shadow of her company anyway. Really, Alana's doing him a favor.

"I'm sorry that Dulles is so far," she says with a mournful frown, throwing her roller bag into the stained back seat of Will's ancient sedan like it's personally offended her. She used to throw her book satchel like that sometimes, pretty eyes blinking rapidly in frustration following a bad class or a bad shift in the library.

"Comes with the territory of having the car," Will says with casualness he doesn't feel. "Imagine how much worse if it had been a truck."

"Good way to make a lot of friends each semester," she replies with a teasing smile. "Not good friends, but a good way to stay in everyone's contact list, anyway."

"I like to know everyone's number," he shrugs, and takes the westbound freeway with the automatic gestures of someone accustomed to long drives beginning the same. "I'd rather you ask me, anyway. Even if you're not super hot on me being there in a week too."

Alana seems to sit on that awhile, white signs and the scatter of cars in the dark pulling her eyes away. She's never been one for quick repartee, even if she's capable of it. Her words are measured into cups, as a baker makes bread. She has an appreciation for quantity and texture that he appreciates as a person who often lacks both.

“You know it’s not that I don’t want you to go, right?” she says, fingers laced on her knees. It’s a professional stance, one that she likes better than crossing her arms, the default, the defensive look.

(*No, not really.*)

“It’s that I wanted the time for me,” she continues. They pass the Academy of Sciences, the Potomac, the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge. “To explore. You don’t see things the same when you’re in a group.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Will says, and he’s not bitter, he’s just not a traveler. Family vacations are for other people. Hunting trips are practical, said his Daddy - they gather food, they pay for themselves in the swinging weight of hung meat.

Alana nods, because she expects this, and it’s not unfair that she does. “My parents and my brothers...we all went to Paris one year. Can’t think of any of it without thinking of them. The food tastes like conversations. Nights are measured in deciding where you’re going next, who’s tired, who wants to get up early to see one thing or another. It’s not really *your* moment. I really wish this trip wasn’t with everyone else, but that’s the grant I could get in on, and it’s the one that comes with an invitation to watch Doctor Lecter’s group.”

The Potomac is on their right, a dark snake growing further away with every mile closer to the airport. Will chews the corner of his mouth. *Why Doctor Lecter’s group* , is the question that no one seems to be able to adequately explain outside of unflattering terms and unattractive comparisons; Heaven’s Gate, People’s Temple, The Family International. It’s not really Alana’s thing, even if it is Beverly, Brian, and Matthew’s. There’s a career to be built there, if only you can be the first cited paper on it in every study that follows after.

“Got the hots for doctor?” he asks, humming a laugh, trying to not be sensitive. He is, but he tries, and she’s always been good at understanding that, even if she doesn’t actually like it. “Or just interested in being a disciple despite that progressive, independent woman education of yours?”

“No,” she says uncomfortably. “To both, but a lot of people end up staying, and I just want to know why they do. It’s not really a lifestyle that you fall into without some

concessions...autonomy being one of them. You'll see," she adds. "Since you're going, and all."

Will doesn't know if he will, but somewhere to be is somewhere to be. He's good at seeing things, or so he's been told, in less flattering implications.

(*"Think of it as an experience and a favor to me," says Doctor Lecter, and your heart is in your throat at the idea of being wanted, being asked, not simply allowed. You could tell him what you think, like you do all the others, but this time it's solicited, and that's novel.*)

They change to safer topics, like if she has an aisle or a window seat (*aisle; she gets restless legs in turbulence*), if she likes to talk to people sitting next to her (*she does*), if she has a ride when she gets there.

She leaves him forty dollars on top of the glove box, and tells him to call her if he gets too lonely. "Seven hours ahead," Alana reminds him. "I'll shoot you a text when I land and when I find the rest of them." Will knows that's another conversation in her recollection of dinners, cities, nights out, and mentally vows not to. Her fingers today are bright lemon yellow when she gives him a hug for the ride.

Will doesn't mind his own company for the drive back - there's the presence of countless others mindlessly switching lanes, cutting each other off, drones in a pack that can't feel each other's thoughts. It's almost like being in a crowd when he considers that, extends his thoughts to the mini van to his left, or the moving truck parked on the roadside in front of a pretty townhouse.

He parks the car in front of his own ugly building, utilitarian and typical with its brickwork, hiding more numb people from each other's perception. He enters the apartment. He turns on every light from hallway to living room to kitchen and goes back to bed. The tv is running down the way from the doorway of his bedroom, and he imagines Beverly is making an egg breakfast. Leaving this place behind can't come quick enough.

Alana sends him a text in the evening. He marks it as read. Will picks up takeout, with an extra side of rice for Beverly, since she normally uses it for other things later, and has to throw it out a week later.

Will's not equipped to pretend things are different from how they are for this long.

Pack light, says the email.

Not a proble m, thinks Will.

What does one pack for something like this? Their finest funeral suit? Something festive? Will stares into the closet. He has jeans. White shirts. The occasional long sleeved number for presentations, conferences, and department dinners. He has the flannel shirt with the tags still on it.

(*You're hesitant to put it on. You're not trying to loudly camouflage yourself the way Doctor Lecter is. You'd rather disappear. Adventitious protection, pulling nearby things close that aren't a part of you to hide under. Mood, colors, opinions - whatever's safe.*)

He buys a few more things, and tries to ignore the cost. Once in a lifetime trip, Will thinks again and again, and hides in the trivial comfort of other shoppers, milling in the store purposelessly.

Coach seating alone on transatlantic flights sounds terrible in theory, but turns out pleasant in practice. Rolling into Dulles International Airport from a mid-afternoon bus ride, soaking up the yellow light of the terminal, and the fading sun from the airplane is nice the way a long nap is nice. There's a tired, muted quality to all the hours between these foreign seats, and Will puts his earplugs in and lets himself drift.

He doesn't have the best seat - last minute invites to foreign countries generally don't leave opportunities for the best seats, whereas Beverly and the others have spent literal months agonizing about their itinerary, and where they're going to sleep and eat, and practicing a little light Lithuanian to make sure they can ask where things like the bathroom are. Will is not quite literally flying by the seat of his pants, but he doesn't think he'd be able to do more than weakly gesture if he needed something and no one spoke English.

(*Look on the bright side - that's not really different from at home.*)

He wakes up twice during the flight - the first time for an in-flight dinner of some kind of penne pasta with a neatly packaged roll, mixed fruit that is mostly cantaloupe and smells of a senior center or an American Legion luncheon, and a glass of red wine that isn't particularly good, but does seem to be liberally refilled with each sweep of a nice flight attendant. She has a motherly face behind her makeup and red lipstick. Will has a hard time looking up from the blue and yellow violets printed on her neck scarf, and nods his way through most interactions.

(*A thought: do you struggle to connect with women because the ones you knew growing up were so wild in their swing between caretaking and exploding into disarray? Beverly leaps over this hurdle, but Beverly has also never pretended to be anything other than one of the guys, your brother at heart that happens to be a sister. Alana lacks the disarray, but has replaced it with clinical distance, and you're never quite sure if today she will be affectionate and teasing, or if she'll be critical of you and the mess that you are.*)

Will thanks her when she offers him a blanket, and let's him know there's still six hours in the air to go until Copenhagen. He thanks the violets more than the woman's face, but he's pretty sure the message is received, and at worst she thinks he's disabled.

(*Did your mother ever have a scarf like that? Daddy threw all her things away when she died, and you helped throw the rest out when your grandparents do. There was the ornaments from the Christmas tree, but those are gone with the house.*)

Will crushes his eyes closed, and sleeps with a stomach full of acid.

The second time he wakes up, the cabin is especially dark, and Will thinks he heaves in a gasp. That same stone-heavy certainty is on his shoulders and lungs, pressing his cold,

sweating body flat in the poorly cushioned seat. He doesn't think he dreamed, but the sensation has grown increasingly common in the weeks between May and mid-June.

The moon is sailing between sparse clouds over the coast of Scotland, preparing to sink unseen into the west. He lifts the blanket back over his shoulders, wringing his cold hands against each other. He occasionally feels the shifts of the plane over the wind beneath it, and thinks of skating on his socks across the flowered white laminate of the kitchen floor as a kid.

There's the occasional flicker from someone's seatback screen, watching movies to pass the late night hours until the sun can come up and set them back on their path to (*or from*) home, but otherwise there is the long hum of the engines outside the cabin, and the sense Will is suspended in time, free of the ground and the inevitable gravity of it. He doesn't think he'd mind being trapped in this space for a little longer, responsible for nothing but containing himself to a small chair and the view of stars over an invisible but dark ocean. He breathes in and out, and waits for the gut-pull of descent into the lowlands below a couple hours later.

Lithuania is a blanket of green from above and again on the ground, trees abutting the edges of the city of Vilnius as comfortably as cradle walls. Walking between the white and beige of the buildings, sneakers quietly scuffing the cobbled paths, Will can feel the difference between home and here. Nothing feels old at home, not the way that the streets embanking the Neris River do.

"Welcome to Lithuania, Mr. Graham," says the custom agent, with her pink mouth and tired early shift eyes. He's maybe the first of a long progression of people, or maybe she's just like that, pretty but getting started with difficulty. "Please enjoy your stay." The language barrier ensures he doesn't try to ask.

The language barrier, for all that there have been attempts to assist him with this first couple of days, have not kept Will from controlling his own itinerant day in Vilnius. Will has kindly declined all of Jurgita's best efforts to match his hotel to the grant team's accommodations tonight, and as far as he knows, no one knows he's here a day early. He takes his solo flight a day sooner than he's expected to meet up with their caravan from Vilnius University to the Lecters' expansive property in the highland country to the north, and now he's been left to his own devices.

I'll enjoy having a night to myself , he justifies when he checks into his little hotel room, duffel looking lonely on the luggage rack next to an old water radiator. There's no scratchy blankets here, just neatly folded duvets in white. He slides into a jean jacket, ties on a pair of new brown leather work boots (*such frivolity - Daddy would die to see it, but, then again*), and grabs his key card like a man with his first house keys. The petunias in the flower boxes wave goodbye to him when he steps out onto the street, not quite sure where he should go.

The streets don't run in symmetrical grids, is his first observation, at least not here in the old town areas of the city. There's stonework cobbles, and pretty frescos and cafes, red roofed buildings, and plenty of attractive people with practical, good quality clothing walking around in the temperate heat of the day. He's grateful for his small additions to his wardrobe, but he still feels a bit like a sweaty boy that got lost in the mall without his friends to lean into and hide behind.

(*That's your catch 22 - company would be nice. Company would be awful. That doesn't really change no matter what side of the ocean you're on.*)

Will thinks the rest of his friends are still wandering elsewhere, not back to the city before their voluntary isolation. He wasn't going to be able to tag along with everyone at the last minute anyway, and there would be a nagging sensation that Beverly and Alana are being overly solicitous again, and aren't doing what they want. Brian and Matthew would definitely be on different ends of the spectrum, with Matthew overly invested in getting Will up to date on all his crazy theories about the collective or watching with that strange perception of his own, and Brian barely keeping himself from saying something that would offend their hosts.

Speaking of whom.

Vilnius University is the same as George Washington University - he can step from the streets of the old downtown directly onto the campus, artfully woven into the fabric of the city. Will's heard enough about it, and dodged enough emails by the dutiful assistant that he feels an obligation to take a look at it. Make a memory, free of association. He should also consider bringing a thank you gift for Jurgita, bless her persistent heart. Will can only imagine how difficult life must be for someone managing the time and travel for a professor famous for his lack of free time.

It’s barely a few blocks from where he’s staying, with more of the vivid bright red roofs, and oak doors, and leaded windows to buildings likely older than Will five times over. This is a place Will never thought he’d see for himself. Standing on the narrow sidewalk, looking up at persistent grass in the cracks of the pavers, and up at the high white plaster walls, it’s wholly unknown to him. Lithuania isn’t exactly on the beaten path for European travelers, though with the cool air coming off a north wind and the cheery flowers and rasping of tree leaves above, that seems kind of a shame.

Vilnius isn’t like DC, or Baltimore, much less a New York or a New Orleans, but it feels lived in and well-kept. Will can imagine why that would appeal to Doctor Lecter. One foot in the country, one foot in a large enough city to push away the itch for cosmopolitan spaces.

Speaking of.

The crinkle of well-worn white paper comes from the inside of his billfold. ***Professor Hannibal Lecter, MD PhD, Vilnius University Chair of Lithuanian Studies, Johns Hopkins University Professor Emeritus of Surgical Medicine*** . It’s more worn than it should be, occasionally pulled out consideringly. “Hi, I’d like to cancel!” he’d start typing out. “I’m a dumbass counting on this experience to be more than it really can be. Please excuse my incredible rudeness - I would like to submit this random undergraduate who would die for an opportunity to take my place as recompense.” But it never gets sent, and the name reads off in a cadence that brings him back to the steamy kitchen, face held by rough but careful hands.

Will pulls up the address on the business card.

The Centre for Lithuanian Studies isn’t a big wing of space, part of the grander Philology building that boasts a tall tower with a unique cross at its peak, shining in the midday sun. It seems like an injustice to be so unassuming when the larger than life teacher it holds is speaking inside, in need of a cathedral when he has an abbey. This door, unlike the others, is a brass monstrosity into the long hall to the lobby of the centre, and feels like a mouth with block teeth.

Today, it appears to be empty, with classes dismissed for the summer and only the occasional whisperings of researchers and clerks whisking between entryways - not a bad thing for Will, but he has the sensation of sneaking into a space that’s not made for him. Nobody sees him do it, but he isn’t meant to be here.

(*You are - meant to be here. You're invited. You didn't even have to ask. Nobody else is. Nobody suffers well enough to stir pity in another man's heart that watched things burn down not so differently than you.*)

Will's feet are very noisy on the stone.

(*God, fuck pity.*)

The lobby itself is like stepping into a different time - tightly cloistered and coffered, old oak wood panels from floor to the door mantels, only to be overtaken by beautiful blue and red frescoes filled with people and animals. It's a sort of cathedral, if not the grand kind he thinks is missing. He's not familiar with the stories being told, only that they are archetypical, and in parts morbid.

Will takes a seat on the center round bench, wrapping the bottom half of a column. His head bumps the raised frame of the wood, spine nestled in and shadowboxed by it. He has nowhere to be.

It's good, staring upwards instead of downwards. Will's gotten into the habit of looking for something there in the carpet and the tiled halls, and the grass of the long green National Mall. He understands that this is a kind of post traumatic stress. He's not a future profiler for nothing, and Will in all his dark mutterings has never neglected to include himself. "Your lack of attention, while understandable, is obnoxious, Mr. Graham," Professor Chilton has said between lectures, and Will bites back with pointed criticism to topics, resources, Chilton's competency.

Today he traces the seasons in Brutalist painted lines above him, every bit as inevitable and unpleasant as the image of finding people scattered around the ground like leaves - here a man is gathering grain on a background of Alizarin crimson, and here he is torn in half by his sickle. Here is a dance around a fire, and here is a reveler thrown in. Here are the skulls of deer killed in the hunt raised up on pikes, and here are dark winds streaking past them. Here a

man digs a hole, and here a tree is planted, surrounded by mourners in ruddy sienna and umber, flowing onwards between vaulted arches and brass candelabra.

Not a cheerful story, the seasons and fairy tales of Lithuania, Will thinks with an open mouthed gaze.

(*People as a whole aren't cheerful in your experience. They're alive, they're doing their best, they feel happy and sometimes they feel sad. Individuals, sure. You don't think Alana Bloom uses liminal rooms like airplane cabins to center herself. You don't think Brian Zeller is losing sleep over how he talks to people, if it actually effects their lives. Matthew Brown certainly isn't.*)

Will looks down - a great stag strides in from a neighboring hall, bending it's proud head to fit through the almond taper of the ceiling. This space, unlike the blue and red above Will, glows white in midday sun from the windows. The animal is inky black and familiar by comparison, the kind prime to lay on a (*carpet*) forest floor and crush the air out of him, nothing to be seen from behind its bulk.

(*But your father? How many times did he center himself in his armchair, listening to newscasters drone on? You can still remember falling asleep on the couch next to him some nights, curled up under that ugly, scratchy blanket. How many times did your stick-thin momma go to the porch to have a smoke and resolve herself to being separated in marriage and mind?*)

Will blinks, and the stag persists.

"Will," he hears, like it's a surprise. Maybe from the stag's mouth. It doesn't normally talk, but breathes heaving white steam, and maybe it's tumbled together into words. He's seen it a lot lately. It should know his name.

(*People are sad. The murals should be sad.*)

"Will," he hears repeated - the deeper tones of Doctor Lecter, not the rest of the team. Not his deer.

It takes Will a moment to recognize him, blinking away the black hulking mass of antler and fur from the hallway. It disappears between the wet click of eyelids, and becomes Doctor Lecter. He puzzles at his own recognition of his voice. He supposes that's the kind of distinguishment you earn as a lecturer - absolute authority of speech and tone. It must be nice to be in a class with him.

Will, to his own shock, has moved alongside his animal visitor, and looks around with confusion. He is still standing in the long hall of the building, in the growing whiteness where a tree grows above. He thought he had been sitting still in the vaulted cloister, splinters from the underside of the bench otherwise smoothed by years finding purchase in his fingers.

Will's head gives him a sharp ache from beneath his glasses. It's too bright here. Doctor Lecter has surely come from one of the old doors woven into the wood paneling, as secret and quiet as a monk from his study. Will thought for sure he would hear him, but even Will admits he misses things sometimes, too busy in his head to be of much use.

"I didn't expect to see you until tomorrow morning," the other man says consideringly but with a smile, looking to meet eyes. Will hopes he can't pick up on Will's confusion, honey-slow mind coming back online. "Your compatriots are still yet in Kaunas, and I do not expect to see them today. Have you been in contact with them, yet?"

Will sways a little on his feet, looking up to the painted umber brown tree in the vaulted hallway, where stars and beasts and people are intertwined in her branches. A cheeky looking bird sits perched at the door at its end.

He shakes his head. "Thought I should check out the school that Bev talked about so much. I think I was looking for you," he says a little absently, eyes tracing down to the bird again, wide eyed and striped above the doorway into the hall's proper entrance, where Doctor Lecter stands now, a little larger than life in his white shirt and blue waistcoat. Too warm for the full ensemble, Will supposes. It's summer after all. "I needed to find you one of these days, anyway."

A strange look crosses Doctor Lecter's features before he recovers his smile.

“So you have,” he rumbles, and looks up to the fresco himself.

He taps the bird’s beak, broad arm stretched to reach above the door mantel. “I see you have found your counterpart as well - Gegutė. Laima’s messenger.”

“ *So when he had occasion to be seen, He was but as the cuckoo in June, Heard, not regarded.* ” Will quotes. Doctor Lecter smiles widely at that, seemingly very pleased, little downward crescent of a tie pin glinting from the sunlight through the windows.

Will smiles, shaking off the last of his fog. “I’m thinking I probably shouldn’t be flattered by all the Shakespearian parallels. Is…” he mentally trips over Doctor Lecter’s seamless pronunciation of the word, not wanting to offend, “...Gegutė also in the habit of making blunt proclamations on behalf of Fate?”

“Oh absolutely, only the bluntest,” he laughs. “It’s said her singing decides how long your life shall be, and your fates for the rest of the year. Hunger and poverty will chase you if you’re empty-handed and meet.”

“Sounds terrible. She must be wildly popular at parties.”

Doctor Lecter gestured with palms up, amused. “At all of ours, at the very least. They are quite ubiquitous birds in Lithuanian lore, alongside storks and swans. Lots of cuckoos out in my family’s part of the country. We shall have to introduce you to one. I find them to be quite lovely at night and in the early morning. There’s an oak where a few call home.”

Will shrugs with a smile. “I’ll have to make sure I’ve eaten first and have some pocket change,”

he says. “Would hate to get caught without that for six more months.”

Doctor Lecter laughs, and opens the door behind him. “Please, come inside and tell me how you find Vilnius and my little home between homes.”

Will's surprised to see it's bright and cheery. After the stark whiteness of the hall and the mural, it feels like he should be descending into a cave or the heart of a church, not a welcoming office. Will follows behind, eyes fixed to the shiny silk of the backside of Doctor Lecter's waistcoat which shimmers subtly with each step. He finds himself relieved. He's not in charge of what to do next; he just needs to follow after.

For a long time, Will just looks around, the same as he does in the painted lobby.

Doctor Lecter is obliging of this, settling a number of papers on his desk, straightening up a non-existent mess. Will can't picture him living in the layered squalor of an obsessive researcher or absent-minded teacher. He doesn't think Doctor Lecter's capable of having a button sit idly open - even just the casual absence of his jacket is disorienting to Will's perception of him, but he supposes it's a warm day, and the good doctor wasn't expecting company.

"I'm pleased you were able to make it, and more so that you were able to find some time to visit the university, and me, most importantly," Doctor Lecter says with a sweep of an arm to the visitor's chair, an old black spindle chair that feels very throne-like in spite of its humble featureless color. "Our contact in the States was brief and somewhat sensitive in nature. Dedicating a chunk of your summer to watch our pastoral arts at the last minute is quite the request."

"I didn't have anywhere else to be," he says, and cringes at how rude that sounds. Doctor Lecter, despite that, gives him that strange weighted look he has from time to time again.

(*There was a documentary once - the American Bald Eagle, screeching wild-proud in the high trees of the northwest coast, at once cold and shining as armor in the morning light. You are small and long legged with your first pair of eyeglasses because a school nurse tells your Daddy that's the first place to start with your troubles in class. The golden iris and broad black foveae of the bird's head are a subject of envy. You can't see well over the Medicaid cheap frames, but try to make up by listening and observing, scientific and fey at your core. You've grown into your vision. The eagle just flies and catches things effortlessly. Doctor Lecter is like that, you think. You wonder what he sees in you so fast.*)

(*Vulnerability. A tree struggling in the undercanopy of a forest, choked out by the taller trees' branches.*)

Doctor Lecter sits, eyes still rooted to Will.

"My sister and I are quite happy to provide somewhere for you to run aground this week. With any luck, perhaps a bit longer. You shouldn't feel excluded from the full length of the trip simply because you don't want to go make sketches, interview other scholars, and navel gaze over repurposed medieval buildings and museums," he says with a lilting tone and a flash of a toothy grin - Will doesn't quite know what to think of that.

"Seems like that's kind of the purpose of the trip?" Will says and leans forward. The spindles at his back creak. "Not a very responsible use of university funds, having unrelated visitors just hang out at leisure in the countryside."

"Don't tell your brothers in arms, but I funded it myself," Doctor Lecter says with a wink. "Not a great fan of my family's practices, the chair of the Philology programs here in Vilnius. Considers me a tad too…" and he flexes his fingers, tattoo glyphs flashing between them as birds raise feathers. "Traditionally adherent, shall we say. I like to invite open-minded people when I can to counteract that, and sponsoring a European holiday is a pittance. Think of it as giving back," he says, leaning forward in his chair as well, hands clasped at his crossed knees.

Traditionally adherent. Will rolls his tongue in his mouth, and sucks at his teeth. "I mean as long as I'm not signing up for some church burning or scrying the future through the shape of a fresh liver," he says with a half grin.

Doctor Lecter leans back, adjusting the rippling fabric of his tie absently, pin caught between his fingers. "That's the spirit, he smiles. "Our solstice audience is often a random bunch - many of the celebrants have been long abroad, and don't have the luxury of tenure a couple hours from home. You are equally welcome as they are, and will likely not stand out, if that's what concerns you. Not unless Mischa or myself goes out of the way to do so, anyway," he concedes.

"I feel a bit weird intruding on something for your family," Will says with his smile twisting back down, taking in the tall shelves of books, the heavy wooden desk of Doctor Lecter's

office, the shining brass and tin of ornamentation and pens. His window overlooks a cobbled courtyard, and at the forefront of the panes of glass, a large iron cross casts long rays from side to side, a crescent moon perched at its apex.

“Elements and heavenly bodies are of particular interest to our ancestors, and now in our community.” Doctor Lecter says, catching Will’s long gaze. “This is a remnant of a wayside cross that belonged to a friend - it is destined to stand with its brethren at the front of our house, and mark his passing. Not this time, but perhaps in the winter when it is quieter and less to account for.”

Will admires it, all the curving and sharp parts in equal turns. “Are they all meant to be grave markers?”

“Not at all,” says Doctor Lecter, striding over to the cross. “They’re shrines of a sort - once common at crossroads, or the fronts of farmlands and sacred places. Co-opted by the Catholics, but much older than that if they are true ones. Think of them as a little house of their own, raised on a long pole of wood, sheltering spirits instead of signs to destinations. This one was left in disrepair,” he adds, reaching to finger a long streak of flaking rust. “But we’ll set it to rights. I intended to stop at some others known to me tomorrow on the ride out to Utena and the house. It will be the first of our nine days together, and we will begin by honoring the forgotten old roads.”

Will stands in front of the cross, and admires the age of it. It’s not his field of study, and he’s never been one to stop for the historical markers, here or anywhere else, but the reverence held for something that’s little more than black and orange metal, flaking at its corners, fills him with excitement instead of boredom. From the reflection of the glass, Doctor Lecter watches Will.

*(**Save the eagle, feather'd king,** you mouth to yourself, poem coming easily to mind as you avoid meeting eyes in the window panes, **that keeps the obsequies so strict.**)*

A nine day week with nine days of ritual observance as it turns out requires a lot of work. Will laughs when he thinks about it - there might be liturgical outfits, eucharist equivalents, and strict guidelines that need to be fulfilled, but at the end of the day, Doctor Lecter is still required to ask for vacation days, clear out the fridge, and pack a bag like any other person.

When he locks up his office with Will in tow, Will's charmed by a long grocery list written in a more loose script than Doctor Lecter's own hand. Something from his sister, he explains while folding it into precise segments and tucking it into a blazer pocket. (*Striped, navy blue and hair-thin threads of red. Practically a neutral, if his lecturing outfit is held next to it, like he doesn't want to be seen by anybody today.*)

"Need some things from the store to make the ancestral goulash?" Will teases, his own hands tucked deep in the pockets of his jacket. He doesn't really need it, but he's gone comfortable and tired in the afternoon heat of the office, and holds that to him like a blanket back outside in the gentle humidity of the city. Somewhere there are birds singing in the twilight.

"You wound me, Will," says Doctor Lecter. "Lesson number one - we are a meat, bread, and potatoes culture, not a pasta one. Though, to be fair," he adds. "I did go to university for a time in Florence, and could make you a serviceable version."

Will smirks, counting cobblestones under his feet. "Not necessary," he says. "The night before a trip is always kind of weird. Double checking if you have toothpaste, and if you threw out the leftovers."

"Did you have much to take care of?" asks Doctor Lecter. "I often take it for granted that I draw a curiosity from researchers in theology and anthropology, but you have indulged me rather than asked to attend, and I fear I may have put you out of pocket. Jurgita has told me you are quite difficult to reimburse," he adds with a hooked smile.

No, Will thinks. No, he didn't leave much behind at all, but it's hard to communicate that. The only things of importance are his passport, his clothing, and a small bag of iron fishing weights in different shapes that are sitting in a plastic bag somewhere in his luggage. They draw attention with the airport security, but Will takes them anyway when he's told there's a lake on the Lecter's property. (*Your Daddy made them, melted them down from scrap, hammered them from old boat parts. "Waste not, want not," he tells you, and proudly ties them to his line, a rare thing he can make for himself instead of buy from the tackle store. You felt them like a magnet in the luggage hold of the plane, somewhere beneath your feet.*)

"Ah," Will shrugs, scratching at growing five o'clock shadow on his chin. He'll have to shave again in the morning. "I didn't have a lot going on. I certainly didn't need a Jurgita of

my own to rearrange my schedule to do this."

Doctor Lecter nods, and seems to sit on that for a moment. "I *am* sorry to leave you at loose ends tonight - very poor hosting on my part. I would offer to take you with me, but I fear you'd grow very bored with my errands in preparation of the solstice festivities, and not want to commit to spending several more days in my company."

"Saving the good stuff for later?" Will asks with a smile, watching the cheery petunias and daisies of the hotel's window boxes come into view, gone purple and pink in the late sunset.

"Never ruin the surprise if you can help it," Doctor Lecter says with a finger wag, so quick and subtle that it's less a corny joke and more elegant wave of the hand. It's fascinating how he does that, to be that comfortable in his own skin. "No fun to be had with me this evening, but tomorrow, we will meet as planned at the Square."

"Is there really enough room for all five of the researchers in your car?" asks Will. "I saw the 'pack light' request, but it's rather beyond us to not pack the substantial mass of our bodies."

Hannibal nods readily to this as well. "Mr. Zeller will be coming along with two other researchers from another university and will meet with our caravan in Utena. We'll proceed to the house from there. A bit tight with the luggage, but we'll certainly make due."

"Good thing there wasn't much to bring," Will says with a smile that sits dead on his face, habitual. He can't really help it. He's not even sure he's sorry for it, but Doctor Lecter is being gracious, and he is not. Will shakes his head, dropping the self-pity somewhere between a crack in the pavers, burying it under a foot like he can stamp it out like an old cigarette butt.

(*Be considerate. Be kind.*)

"Thank you, Doctor Lecter," Will adds a bit shyly, staring down at the cobbled road. He has a few blocks to walk to his hotel for the night, a modest thing not too far from here, but certainly well beneath what he had been offered funds for. He doesn't want to take advantage. Just the opportunity feels like theft, with so many students and researchers clamoring for the

Doctor's attention. "I know I'm just filling in for Jimmy, but this is definitely better than trying to fill empty space."

(*You can't imagine going back to what you left.*)

The other man nods again, raising a hand to Will's shoulder and giving it a light squeeze. "You've asked for nothing, only accepted what's been offered. I look forward to seeing what you'd actually ask for. But Will, I must ask one more thing of you tonight," he says, switching a briefcase from one hand to the other.

Will nods - instruction is preferable. Instruction is clarity of purpose.

Doctor Lecter gives another Cheshire grin. "Please call me Hannibal," he says. "You are not my student or a patient, and we are intended to be like family in the context of the week ahead. My sister will frown at me if I have you calling me by titles from work that I don't carry home."

"Do you carry others?" Will asks, and almost winces at his errant mouth again, but Doctor Lecter...Hannibal doesn't seem bothered by it.

"Yes, in a fashion," he says. "A secondary name of Baltic origin is not terribly common, but traditional in our neck of the woods. Others in our circle of followers adopt them if they feel called to. Perhaps someday I will tell you mine."

Hannibal sees him off, watching as Will bids him a good night and good luck with his tasks for the evening. He watches when the doors of the hotel open and close on Will, and Will wonders for a hysterical second if he doesn't stare onwards until the moment Will closes the door of his hotel room and shucks off his jacket to sleep, skipping dinner, as thought aware and unrelenting in his intent that Will find somewhere to be until he is called on again.

Hotel beds are stiff and chlorine fresh, and this has always been a huge comfort to Will. His head is still downstairs in the street, watching for opportunities to make a fool of himself in front of someone he thinks he actually likes and respects. The additional small comfort to the smell is that when he sleeps, he avoids the idea of the living room tonight, a mildewed space always waiting behind the bedroom door.

He is instead in the beige-brown vastness of a hospital bed, grasping weakly at the side rails the way he can remember doing when he has his tonsils out in fourth grade. He has a bad bout of strep throat and an ongoing cough that makes him sound like a chain-smoking friend of a friend of his father's instead of his nine year-old son. It's one of the rare occasions that old Beau Graham who's tight with a buck sees the value in modern medicine, and asks for help. Will can still remember the ache in his joints and his neck - he tells his Daddy "I feel like the school bus has gone and run me over."

Will feels much the same now, listening to the low hum of a talk show that he can't quite make out - maybe the remnants of a conversation on the plane in the morning before meeting with Doctor Lecter. He records things like that sometimes, more camera than brain. Photographic memory. Eideteker.

(*It sounds like a title or a curse when you put it like that.*)

Daddy, like the old days, is sitting in the side chair. His mouth is closed, but things on the back of his neck are missing. Not a good conversationalist, his Daddy, double-so after blowing out his tongue with muzzle burn and the impact damage of a rifle round, but he pats Will's hand in the awkward well-meaning way that he did back then. Beau was never known for a good bedside manner, but when his son is in the hospital, he doesn't shirk off. Beau calls in sick. Beau misses a week of work to listen to doctors who use phrases he doesn't understand or really care about, as long as it's all set to rights.

They sit like that for the night, Will occasionally flexing his fingers against the bed to crack the soreness out from between the bones. Beau draws the thin flannel blanket to cover his shoulders and neck, and only stains the edges a little with the blood that drips from his mouth. Can't really help it - no control with no tongue to hold it back or swallow it with.

The first time Will sees Beverly, Alana, and Matthew, it's for breakfast in a pub near to the university. They are pink-cheeked and in good cheer after their day trip and Will is relieved he didn't go with them. He knows nothing of the old buildings, in all things a novice to the country save for what he's heard through Beverly and Alana, and now in part through Hannibal - he would have been adrift talking to the university staff and taking pictures of Hanseatic halls, or whatever the fuck it is that they were there to do.

(*Have a good time. Be young. Be able to enjoy the afternoon without worrying about stepping on the wrong subject, where you yelp like a dog with their tail pulled between your knees when someone inevitably puts a foot down on it.*)

"Hey!" Alana says brightly, the kind of bright that is covering for something. "Heard you got to do some walking around yesterday with Doctor Lecter," she says. "I'm glad you were able to connect with someone."

"It seemed like the thing to do," he retorts, shaking the rust from his mouth, unused since leaving the other man at the sliding doors last night. "Urban exploration, eating new things, understanding what the fuck we're going into today," he drawls.

They are cutting into eggs, and Will stares down the yellow yolk on his own plate, seated neatly on a porridge that is much too heavy for the inevitable backseat ride he has coming. It looks good. It steams like a proper fresh plate of food. The only problem is the hum of a night of sleep he's not sure is him drifting into an old space or an actual dream, churning his stomach with the memory of swollen hands and stiff legs. If he doesn't eat, he is making a fuss, and so - he eats.

"So, a couple of things to expect," Beverly starts, looking from Alana to Will and rolling her eyes at Matthew who shakes his head. "Since today's the first day of the traditional week, and I expect Doctor Lecter to be busy handling his waycross stuff like he said in the phone call. Most of these people live on the property. Like, never leave, don't own cars, don't have their own bank accounts or driver's licenses level of never leave. There's some people who live nearby that join in, but there's something in the ballpark of 50 people there at any time. Maybe don't ask about those kinds of things?"

"And you think it's not a cult," snorts Matthew.

“Communes aren’t exactly known for their resource splitting,” Alana says with a roll of her eyes. “Kind of defeats the purpose if everyone just shows up periodically to worship. Then it’s just church.”

“Just because you get off on this countryside return to traditional values stuff…” begins Matthew.

Alana’s cheeks pink a bit with irritation, but she keeps her cool - that’s Alana, through and through. Will thinks about the drive to the airport and her earnestness.

“I don’t ‘get off on it’, if that’s what you think,” she replies. “I just think it’s an interesting reaction to political changes, even religious ones. The Lecters and their, I don’t know, I guess clan?” she asks with a shoulder pushed into her ear. “They are way more prolific in their return to ancestral lifestyles than the average Romuva practitioner, assuming they haven’t been at it the whole time. It’s interesting to see a modern regression like that,” she tries to explain. “Nobody has progressed the study of the history of the region as industriously as him, even if he doesn’t include his own practices. You have to respect that.”

Beverly doesn’t seem entirely sold. She frowns instead. “Regression into something akin to being Amish or Fundamentalist Mormon. I don’t think they’re doing something nefarious, but this is the kind of stuff that can turn into extremism pretty quickly.”

“Theoretically,” Alana retorts.

“Hence the research, hence the thesis’ getting primed for a dissertation,” Matthew says around a mouthful of his own porridge. “I’m practically hard at the implications. Even Chilton’s going to be jealous. God knows he would have taken Jimmy’s place in a heartbeat.”

Will tries to tune this out. It’s curious how quickly they’re willing to jump at the idea of the Lecter family being up to no good. Will’s had to listen to them sing their praises for the last year to the affable if strange doctor, even if they do tease at something darker from time to time.

Who all did they talk to in the week before meeting here? What context do they have right now that Will doesn't? He knows they had other traditionalist practitioners to speak to - a great deal of interest lays in marking the differences between the standard paganists and the community awaiting them up north.

(*But what's a herd without a black sheep? What good are clouds on the horizon if some of them aren't going to brew up a storm? Sometimes you don't understand why Beverly and the guys are into cultural anthropology and law enforcement as a pair, but then again, don't you also like to stare at the occasional human disaster unfolding and think wouldn't it be great to dissect this?*)

He thinks instead of how fondly the iron cross was handled just the day before, Doctor Lecter approaching it as a familiar friend, merely in need of some care and someone to recognize the significance of it. Will skittered eyes across an office full of small treasures collected between books and on tabletops, kept and considered like gifts from elderly parents or drawings from younger cousins instead of relics and symbols.

Doctor Lecter, of course, doesn't have anything left of his parents save things like that. Will likes to think he doesn't go from graduate student to graduate student telling people this. The scrutiny of the Lecters feels intolerable to Will who knows little of the actual practices of the Lecters - he reasons this is because his snapshots are of a person instead of a leader, and leaders are made for criticism.

"Doctor Lecter seems pretty kind," Will says quietly, turning a glass of coke on the table, studiously ignoring his congealing breakfast. "I have a hard time imagining handing off AKs and torches and telling people to burn the local chapel down."

"No, we save that for Norwegian metal bands, sans the guns," says Beverly, smiling around a buttered slice of rye toast. "Only respectable offerings to archaic sun and cosmological gods here. Only ambiguous unstudied family rites of the seasons thanks to the iron curtain through most of the last decade." She chews a bite, churning the yolks of her eggs until she can dip slices of bacon into them.

Matthew leans back in his chair. "But it's weird," he says. "It's weird that converts don't get to leave the property, or if they do, it's because they've renounced international citizenship. It's a bloodline religion to an extent, right? Something Indo-European specific to the Latvians and Lithuanians? Why the need for external followers?"

“Gods need worshippers,” Will replies unthinking, staring into a cup of coffee. “Gods love their native sons and daughters, but gods are probably short on those these days.”

“Not a lot of standing places of worship for celestial gods, even in their home country,” Alana agrees. “The Lecters just happen to be an nearly impervious cell, despite the world going on without them.”

“Insular,” corrects Beverly again, like she uses that to convince herself too. “Not impervious. We’re popping that bubble this week, and I for one can’t wait to see if this is a utopia or a tiny Waco.”

(*Everybody likes a good disaster.*)

the first steps onto their soil

Chapter Notes

> I'm extending the completion date on this out to New Years - I've been editing, and have needed to add content to resolve a couple of things in the plot, and didn't like rushing through it over the next week. Also, check my Twitter @ChaparralCrown for a sample illustration of Lithuanian wayside crosses/stogastulpiai for today's chapter.
>
> Thanks for your patience! <3

The wide courtyard of the Konstantino Sirvydo Park is tempered with white garden roses, soft curving benches, and an angular progression of concrete fountains that bring to mind the Cold War and less so the Jesuit preacher that the space is named for. Sitting on their suitcases at the edges of the park, Matthew twirling a lit cigarette and Alana ambling with a sort of anticipatory contentment, Will leans into his knees, closes his eyes, and listens to the wind through the leaves of the ring of alder trees behind him. The morning sun is pleasant through the cloth of his white shirt, where he thinks a sunburn will soon follow.

There's a rightness in beginning their journey in a place meant to elevate a local hero of what Doctor Lecter (*Hannibal, you remind yourself*) must see as an impostor religion, like he can take all these young minds away from that image of piety and replace it with the one he has cultivated at home. There's a church on every corner in Vilnius, unwittingly wearing symbols taken from their predecessors, celestial crosses on their peaks and doorways meant for other beings. Hannibal must take some sort of comfort in that.

The insect buzzing of the summer lawn and the engines of cars in the street is what Will thinks disguises Hannibal's approach. There is nothing, and then there is the heavy relief of a hand blocking the sun on his shoulder, covering cotton and the freckling skin beneath that.

"I see you found the others," comes the amused drawl from his left. When Will cracks open an eye, an attractive black leather work boot is next to his scuffed white and black tennis shoes. (*You opt for comfort over the clean newness of your own work boots today.*) Perfect in every way, save for a few water spots near the toe, dark and matted.

Hard to keep anything totally perfect, Will muses with a half-smile.

The hand on his shoulder has no real force, though it's a little overfamiliar in some ways - the same way the thumbs had been to clear his face of rogue tears back in May. But, Will's here for a different purpose than the others, and Will and Hannibal's acquaintance has always erred on the side of personal instead of professional. Families hug right? Even Beau embraced in his stilted way, grasping necks like buoys afloat in the harbor.

(*Hannibal could do that, you know. Just slide his hand from white shirt to the pulse in your throat, clutch you tight at the elbow from the other side, wincing into your hair like it pains him to love you. You wouldn't even take offense to the stolen gesture. It would be kind of nice to feel again. It wouldn't be the same, but you have quite the imagination.*)

Will clears his throat, chasing away the film of a mind gone elsewhere. "All abuzz and ready for a little compare and contrast," he replies, looking up past the sun to where the smooth gelled silver hair is filament bright. "Good morning."

Hannibal smiles, widely. "I do like to put on a good show," he says low and amused, something just for the two of them. His hand disappears, gone like it was never there, drawn into a loose clasp with the other behind his back.

The doctor stands with the kind of polite attention typically reserved for service members and instructors, much less at ease now surveying the group. Beverly pulls earbuds from her ears, and Matthew crushes his cigarette underfoot, looking surprised to have missed Hannibal's entrance. He's usually more observant than that, but serves him right.

"Good morning," begins Hannibal with a stone-smooth look. "I trust everyone has enjoyed the west country and the coast?"

Alana stops her pacing, nodding with a small smile and a quiet good morning of her own. The light blue of her polish winks from around a trim navy jacket. "Of course, thank you Doctor Lecter. Getting to attend the seminar at VMU was a particularly nice treat. That was very thoughtful of you to arrange."

“A little English unprompted does wonders when feeling lost away from home, yes?” he replies, and turns to look at Beverly. “Miss Katz, I trust Mr. Zeller was able to find his way to Miss Lounds and Mr. Budge after with no issues?”

She nods. “Can’t promise Freddie and Brian don’t argue for the two hours it takes to get to Utena today, but as long as they find your guy at the train station, I suspect they’ll be fine. He wasn’t too torn up about not having to come back here and go on a longer ride with a cramped car.”

Hannibal nods. “And thank you for being so prompt to arrive here, and for packing lightly as requested. I know it’s not an easy way to spend a trip to Europe, but alas, we lack a spacious American vehicle on this particular occasion to accommodate it. Gifts to leave at our stops on the road require some special attention.”

Will looks up at Hannibal, elbow resting on his knee, hand resting on his chin. “Is this from your errands yesterday?”

“In part, yes,” Hannibal says with a sly look. “There are others that will be taken out to the house by us, and more still by my assistant.”

Alana’s eyebrows comes together, the way they do when she’s confused - Will doesn’t see it often. She’s so frequently put together and smooth in ways that aren’t dissimilar from Doctor Lecter. “Jurgita?” she asks. “I didn’t realize she was a member of the group.”

The mysterious Jurgita, assistant extraordinaire and persistent asker-after of receipts. He wonders what the shape of her irritation looks like, if she’s what he imagines her to be. Will absently thinks not for the first time he should probably apologize to her. He’s been very difficult.

Hannibal nods. “I’m sure if you catch her at the right time, she can tell you how she washed up on the family’s shores. You’ll find you have quite a lot in common - she’s also born American, though she claims to be a reformed one, and took a Lithuanian name when she changed her citizenship.”

Beverly frowns, as does Matthew - Will thinks back to breakfast. “I thought your group was pretty strict about staying on the reservation, as it were,” she says and asks in part, tapping notes into her phone.

“You don’t have to live in the wilds of the country to have a love for wild gods,” Will shrugs, recalling their conversation at breakfast. He feels a little pleased curl in his gut to see them have to reassess. Everybody likes to make assumptions, but Jurgita is a facet of normalcy, bubbly on the phone, pleasant, a faculty member of an established university. Brian and Matthew may not trust Doctor Lecter entirely, but they trust the system.

(*Not everything is nefarious. Some people just want to get back to old fashioned blood sacrifice instead of the long-winded pageantry of global religion used to exert force and influence through the national military, but nobody wants to hear that from you, consummate spitter on churches that you’ve grown up to be. “Too skeptical for god I guess,” you said once to a parish preacher, an ersatz therapist during a time your Daddy couldn’t afford a proper one, even with the government assistance.*)

“Just so, Will,” says Hannibal with a pleased look of his own. “But to clarify Miss Katz, most choose to be out in the woods. Their vocations are at the house if they are not someone originally native to the area, as are their own homes and beds. It’s hardly practical with how complicated it would be to go to and from the property each day. As it so happens, my assistant is what makes it at all possible for me to move around as I do, and needed a car to be able to follow after me to Vilnius as I need. I’d imagine she’d find it quite tedious to ride with me every day - young people often do.”

“That being said,” he says, unclasping his hands, reaching down for Will’s small duffel. “The sooner we get on our way, the sooner I can answer your questions more thoroughly, and we are on a bit of a schedule.”

“Please don’t hesitate to dig into things. I expect students of our culture to be as detailed as possible if we are in consideration for your research projects,” Hannibal says with a smile. “I would hate to be misrepresented,” he adds, and shows them to the car.

Lithuania, or at least the countryside north of Vilnius on the way to Utena, is identical to the rural South in the ways that matter.

This is perhaps reductionist. The words are different on every sign, there's the occasional roundabout, and the cost per litre of fuel would probably make most of Will's acquaintances and distant relatives in Louisiana absolutely apoplectic, but the grass banks to either side of the highway are still high and full of brambles. Electric lines weave between trees and fields, bisected by fences overgrown with creeping vines and weeds. Farming equipment lies idle between properties, and with them there are pockets of equally idle homes and lonely businesses.

From the front seat of a sporty Bentley Bentayga, backpack in his lap, duffel in the foot well, and segments of the world disappearing from the side-view mirrors, Will is a passenger for the first time in years. His position in the passenger seat is subject to a large amount of envy from Matthew and Beverly. (*"Ah, I thought to take the opportunity to explain to Will many of the things that the three of you already have some knowledge of," says Hannibal with an unseen by the others wink to you. "Besides," he adds, "Mr. Graham here is looking a touch cold and would benefit from the heated chair." It's true - you're a little chilled.*)

Hannibal is an unobtrusive chauffeur, despite his assertion of educating Will. He allows Will to sit quietly as they ride out of the city, taking questions from the rest of the passengers in the back and filling silences with anecdotes about the development of the region since his time in the United States as a doctor and now. There are stories of learning to drive for the first time on this very road, and a friend that keeps cherry trees down that exit, and so forth. Will could tell similar stories of Interstate 59 if he tried; another point of relatable connectivity.

He looks over to Will periodically, but never says anything without prompt. It's a sheltered silence, congenial.

Will nods between awake and asleep in his chair with the warmth at his back. He would rest if he didn't think it would be rude to do so, and he can still occasionally feel the clutching ache from his dream in his fingers. He industriously cracks them. He ignores Alana asking him not to. She never did like that, even when they were together, as if he was injuring himself instead of letting off some steam. Engines creak and hiss under pressure too - how are his hands much different?

Beverly has a good sense of humor about it at least, even if she's annoyed at craning her neck around the headrest to see the road ahead - she pulls Will's hair behind his ear periodically, and says "Hey chief, good thing you're not driving with all that hand flexing you're doing. How's the view from shotgun?"

"You could tell me we're outside Biloxi and I'd probably believe you if there was a single egret on the side of the road, or a man selling bait fish," Will says, turning to meet eyes for a moment. Beverly is in professional good cheer mode, determined not to offend, whereas Matthew looks sour. Will grimaces. "Probably should have let Matthew up front to stretch his legs."

"If you watch long enough, you'll likely find either of those," Hannibal says, eyes forward but attention in the cabin of the car. "The highlands are lake country, and we aren't hurting for diversity in our birds or fishing holes. Some themes are universal, regardless of the lingua franca or religion."

From the bench seat in the back, Alana nods. "You don't seem like the usual country boy," she says, eyes peering from the middle to consider Hannibal's face in profile. "You're always so urbane and liberal in your lectures, it's hard to imagine you playing football with the neighbor kids down the lane, or fishing in the creek down from the house."

Hannibal tilts his head, smiling again. "I've reaped wheat and gutted livestock, if that's what you mean. I'll hunt boar this week as well as part of our nine day feast, a tradition specific to our family. I just also happened to have German lessons and rhetoric reading to do shortly after as a boy, unlike most others in our part of the world." He pauses for a moment, fingers tapping the steering wheel in time with a quiet progression of Wagner over the radio. "My sister even now tends a large farm plot, minds goats, and can take me down the garden path when talking in riddles or playing chess as well as any other academic. Life well lived need not be exclusionary of knowledge or manual labor."

"Very old world," Alana nods again, like this all makes sense. It's the kind of thing that would appeal to her, Will thinks. Family from rural North Carolina, at home between Falls Lake and Washington DC with no real struggle to adapt to either. Somebody's clever wife waiting in the wings if she ever decided she wanted that for herself, or indulge her parents desire to see her married and happy somewhere.

(*You thought that way once - the startling normalcy she represented tied to her intellect, a rare flower in a field that matched your analysis but wasn't subsumed by it. It grieved her to hear you enumerate what you think of as your cyclical bad habits, and Hannibal thinks of as inescapable fate. Not much of a difference really - same story, different name for the catalyst.*)

"Did you have time to do anything other than chores and school?" asks Matthew, who still looks sour, cramped in the back seat but with the good fortune to not be in the middle. Alana volunteers herself for that particular indignity. He's been quiet for the first thirty minutes of the ride, seemingly content to listen and observe. He doesn't pay much mind to the surroundings, other than to mark the occasional sign with a look and a glance down at his phone. "Can't imagine it makes for a happy environment, or a healthy mindset. Self-deprivation is a bitch," he adds, finishing with a long *cccchhhh* .

Will sees Hannibal give a small look up to the rear view mirror. Annoyed probably. He doesn't think anyone has done much swearing around him these days, or has dared to.

Whatever flashes across his face disappears quickly. "You come to appreciate things you are responsible for, or you resent them. I don't have any intention of renouncing my heritage or the people that have come to treasure it, so may as well enjoy the ride, yes?"

"What are you responsible for, if your sister is the farmer and goat-herder?" Matthew rejoins. The way he says it is kind of dismissive - an educated man making fun of a rural job, testing what he can get away with.

Hannibal's smile widens, but looks painted on as a polite mask, something worn for obnoxious patients and lecturers and the hundreds upon hundreds of nuisance people that Will finds to be unavoidable. Will remembers he wore it for Chilton too. "Besides the unintentional foreign evangelism?" he asks with raised brows. "As one of the few that resides both in and out of the property, hunting, research, and caring for the wayside shrines mostly. Ensuring that the old places that lead to our home are kept ready and welcoming to the things that inhabit them from time to time."

Matthew gives a thin mouthed grin, each whisker of his five o' clock shadow looking coarse in the wrinkles of his face - he looks less comfortable in the skin of his face than most people, like he just put it on to try the size. "Well that sounds incredibly esoteric and vague."

(*You tried explaining this to Beverly once - why you didn't like Matthew Brown, why you didn't want him standing nearby, watching how you dissect people accidentally on purpose. It's like he came over, just to see how you detached from your ennui to read people like books, a magic trick instead of a tragic need to understand people because you don't feel the same as most of them.*)

(*You presume that. That you don't feel the same. You don't actually know.*)

That actually makes Hannibal laugh, a dry thing that shows the points of his teeth and the coal-warmth of squinted eyes. Will doesn't disagree with Matthew's assessment, but he's glad Hannibal can at least see how silly it sounds from the outside.

"Will has a bit more personal insight on the shrines, as we had an opportunity to discuss it in the office yesterday, but I suppose most of your research would be largely socially oriented instead of religious, Mr. Brown. They don't tell people much about the wayside crosses these days - just that there are a lot of them in Šiauliai, that most are Catholic, and even those are not truly the same as what I'm referring to, unfortunately."

He taps the steering wheel with a considering finger again, violins galloping in time with each other through the speakers. Will marvels at how the normalcy of the gestures takes on meaning in the braid of runes running along the sides of Hannibal's hand, and that Hannibal likely doesn't even consider it anymore.

"We are coming up on our first stop," says Hannibal, "and I can show you what I mean. Practical field work is always preferable to academic writing, wouldn't you agree?"

They take an exit minutes later to a rural road, grass high on either side. (*"Much older routes than the highways, but much less convenient for car traffic."*) Will opts to close his eyes and feel the bumps in the road, and pretend that he's back in his father's old truck, bouncing towards the nearest freshwater with a reasonable dock to cast a line from. A Bentley is hardly the same, but again, he's always been told his ability to pretend is enviable.

It’s not much to look at - really just a pole in the middle of a field, looking rather lonely and sign-like at a four-way stop, with the only thing to differentiate it from any other road sign being the little metal tines and swirls projecting from what almost looks like a lantern on pinewood. If a neighboring kilometre sign was any closer to it, Will would just assume it’s for a family property, missing words or a surname to let people know they found the right place.

Hannibal, however, has no such confusion. “Here we are,” he says, and pulls a cloth from the console of his car, splashes it with water from a thermos from the trunk, and looks to his target, sitting solo and restfully forgotten in a hedge of yellow mustard.

“Wayside crosses are hardly a purely Lithuanian tradition, but the manifestation of them here is an adaptation of a much older practice, in the form of a *stogastulpis* ,” says Hannibal, striding up to it with an investigational purposefulness. He walks around it, thigh deep in the wild flowers, and feels thoughtfully at the small figural snakes holding the base of the structure atop the pole, examines the little windows and the figure housed inside. “A roofed pole, if you will, with ornamental shrines and figural designs. This one, you will see, has no notable Christian cross, saints, or crucifix, but instead a proper saulė - a sun with winds at the edges of each of her rays. Three tiers of roofs, for three layers of existence. The family down the road,” and he points to a small dirt road just beyond the intersection, “is very old, perhaps as old as our family’s markers.”

“Why are you coming out to it to clean it, then? Why not the family that is near to it?” asks Beverly, ever practical.

Hannibal takes his cloth to the iron pieces, polishing at some unseen mark. “Because Audra is in her seventies, only a hair over a metre and a half tall, and not inclined to walk much past her front porch without need, though she makes an effort,” he huffs, reaching higher still to the top tier of the shrine. “It’s a small thing I can do for her, since I typically stop here regardless - make sure the cross is maintained, and she in turn sends a number of very fine woven clothes to us. Nobody is idle, and everything is accounted for. Besides, the drive gives me a proper departure from the idea of my usual commute.”

When he is satisfied with the cleanliness of the post and its ironwork and wood shrine atop it, Hannibal returns to the car, and opens the cooler that has taken up the majority of the trunk, as well as a narrow spade shovel with a long handle. He carries it and a brown paper-wrapped

bundle back, as well as a small bottle of what appears to be some sort of alcohol, sealed with red wax.

“Now for a little gardening?” asks Matthew, smiling a little too self-assured in his joke.

“Something like that,” says Hannibal. “Perhaps fertilizing?” he replies with very white teeth over his lips, not quite biting but amused. He kicks the spade into the soft dirt when he pushes the yellow mustard aside - clearly a spot in front of the pole that is regularly turned with a shovel, merely waiting for the next visit. The soil he brings to the side is black and fertile and damp. He digs about half a meter down with little trouble, the ground well prepared, stalks of the plant swaying with each stroke.

When Hannibal reaches for the paper and unwraps it, there’s a generous cut of meat inside - something red-pink and clean, remarkably clean for something sitting in a blue cooler for what must have been the better part of two hours.

A trip to the butcher, Will’s mind supplies. Not something you take guests to do. Not the kind of place you discuss chuck roasts and backstraps with a person in tow without feeling at least a little bit awkward.

Hannibal puts the meat as casual as one can into the bottom of the hole. Even Alana, normally curious and understanding, watches this with the kind of interest and trepidation that one does watching someone have a fit across the street from where you’re walking. When Hannibal uncorks the bottle with a knife to pull the wax aside, and pours the contents into the hole to lay atop the meat, even Will is of a mind that perhaps this is an older religion than he’s given credit for it - more akin to pouring milk over the crown of a head and awaiting blessings in the Ganges than the simple ash smudges and sanitary eucharist wafers of Catholicism, or grape juice in place of wine in a Baptist congregation.

(*Requiring actual blood is respectable. What is sacrifice if it’s only in miniature, or a representational offering? Should god accept fasting from vice in place of bleeding a lamb or a first born son? It’s hardly the same to you - surely it’s hardly the same to god, but maybe God doesn’t see the difference, and this is decorative hubris.*)

Beverly is the first to blink off her interest (*skepticism*), hands at her hips, staring towards the hole with something like trepidation. Hannibal picks up his spade again to cover it.

“So, are we going to do this for several more stops?” she asks. “I mean, hell, that’s like a two pound ribeye or something there. How often do you do this?”

“At least five more,” explains Hannibal, “and only done at solstices and equinoxes, so a pittance to me, and certainly less of a nuisance than it seems now. Plenty of work the night before the drive home, as I’m particular about what is given,” he adds, looking thoughtful but determined, shovelful after shovelful of dirt falling back over the offering, bits of grass and loamy soil falling onto his black shoes. “But anything worth doing is worth doing well, and doing it yourself,” he finishes.

Getting back into the car isn’t awkward, no matter the confusion of the onlookers - they’ve watched the equivalent of doing the rounds between aging relatives, leaving care packages, but instead the knowledge of that cut of meat rotting in the ground comes to sit in the back of Will’s head, heavy and present and filling the back of his throat the way that he has come to be used to imagining an absence instead.

To his left, Hannibal restarts the car.

Will feels his mouth twist. “It’s a helluva meal to leave behind,” he says. “Do you ever mix it up or leave something different? Do you think it’s appreciated?”

Hannibal just nods, measuring the words over a few scant quiet moments before answering.

“I would not give you a salad and a glass of water, and consider you fed if you came to my house as a visitor,” explains Hannibal. “Surely you understand the significance of doing the same for passing gods?”

Hard to argue with traveling divinity, or the spirit of hospitality, something universal that tries to offer beers in the living room, or opening the only nice bottle of wine on the rack for people other than yourself to enjoy. Even Will doesn’t have a reply to that.

“Ah, I almost forgot,” Hannibal says, and exits the car with a brisk stride. Around the corner of the four-way stop, he drops into the furrow of the side of the road, where it appears he opens something. When he comes back to the car, he has another tidy but large package in hand, wrapped in white butcher paper, very clean and primly sealed with a blue-corded bow. He opens the trunk to put it into the cooler as well, separate from his offerings.

“Is that your thank you for a hole well dug?” asks Alana, turning to lace her arms over the headrest of the back seat, smiling into the cooler with questing eyes. Will can’t see her face, but he knows the hum, the happy tilt to her head. He doesn’t have to see the smile to know it’s there. “Some home goods in exchange for the meat?”

“More meat, actually, to take for the Rasos feasts,” he says, “just a different kind, different preparation.” Hannibal closes the cooler and the back of the car. “Think of what I left as being kosher and appropriate for something divine, and this is instead for our consumption.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to just have them leave the meat at the end of the road since they’re already walking something down here?” asks Beverly looking out the window again at the post, a little more lonely but undoubtedly shining in morning sunlight.

“Ah, but then it wouldn’t be the right kind, would it?” says Hannibal, clicking into his seatbelt and starting the car with the sort of certainty that swallows objection, its hunger sated and unflinching.

True to form, they follow back roads for the majority of the drive north from this point, bumping along the occasional gravel and dirt road, admiring a field of drowsing cattle with their newest of new calves, or a yellow blanket of mustard, rue, and chamomile flowers nodding their heads in the patchy sunlight, cut by the occasional cloud.

Will accepts explanations of the families that live at the edges of these forked shrines, the same way that relatives of his own would explain where Great Aunt Mary used to live, or who owned the gravel pit before the Fosters moved in some time in the 60s, and how nice it is now that a second or third cousin has moved in with their daughter and son-in-law in Memphis.

(*“Now this house, my father gave refuge to a younger daughter of the owners in the 60s when she was under suspicion of espionage. Not enough for the Party to have godless citizens - so too must they close their mouths to questioning Party officials living in extravagance,” says Hannibal, and you watch as he gives the steering wheel another of those thoughtful taps, like clicking a pen, or leaning back in a chair to display his thinking - a long past injustice, a grievance that cannot be repaid. How history must irritate him, even as he pushes forward with surprising optimism for a political orphan and controversial figure of sorts.*)

The majority of these people are not direct associates of the Lecters, even if they are religiously adjacent to each other - Hannibal describes no one with the familiar warmth he talks about his sister in, but as neighbors he’s fond of, characters in the landscape of his book. Whatever strangeness that the Lecters have brought into their Baltic faith doesn’t seem to stop them from working cooperatively with the people around them. Anything better than Catholicism, and anything better than subjugation.

Matthew is suspicious by nature, and Brian is the consummate pessimist, so Will expects nothing but death knells and snide remarks from them as the week progresses, and indeed has grown largely numb to it in the time between accepting his invitation and their departure a week before him, but breakfast suggests that they’re not exactly an island in their thoughts even within the country. Will thinks that it’s too bad that he can’t ask the homesteaders just *what* it is that Hannibal and Mischa Lecter do that causes foreigners to flock to them and never really leave.

There’s a brief moment when they stop at the end of a long driveway that Will wonders if perhaps they’re almost to Utena, maybe close to the actual ancestral home of Hannibal. He can’t really check where exactly the sixth stop finds them, his phone long since lost signal, but three hours pass quickly between hidden roads and deeply forested pockets of land, little ponds and lakes decorating the open fields on occasion.

There’s no cross where Will can see it, but Hannibal grabs his offering of packaged meat and drink, and strides past a gate into a treeline with no hesitation, saying that “I’ll only be a moment,” before disappearing.

Four twenty-somethings left in the car, heads turning back and forth like children left to keep them from being underfoot. Will would laugh, but between the sun filtering through the windshield and the sighing quiet of a country road with no traffic, just falling asleep sounds

fantastic, the kind of comfort he was looking for last night and was given the memory of barely staved off cold instead.

(*“You’s ok,” says Beau, eying the polyester hem of the flannel blanket, never quite meeting eyes, and you know there’s a void instead of a neck on the other side of his bowed head. With the memory comes the hum of muted soap operas running on the hospital tv mounted to the wall, the scratchy whine of cathode tubes. “They says you’s ok.”*)

The pine and spruce are thick here. Will turns his head to rest against the window, eyes cast down to a bed of cornflowers and bright purple amaranth sticking their spiked heads out from the tall grass before they fade into the shadows of the underbrush.

(*“You’s ok.”*)

Will sighs against a rising anxiety, empties his lungs from top of inhale to bottom of diaphragm. He opens the car, stepping out - “I just need to stretch my legs,” he says, while Beverly and Alana turn to each other again, making suppositions of why the wait, why the hidden road, distrustful rural types, private property owners. Will, in many ways, is a distrustful rural type with no hidden road himself, and just gives a bitter little twist of a grin.

In the clarity of the late summer morning and beyond the smudged car glass, the woods are darker still. He can make out the trunks of tall pine, their lower branches worn away by choking each other’s light out.

The flowers end at the side of the road, but nature is pernicious, and little hillocks of moss and grass grow around the fallen timber of trees that don’t survive the winter, or age, or the relentless press of their brothers and sisters on all sides. Will intuits small animals, the crawling bugs, mushrooms, the loamy press of decay on the dirt. He smells more than sees water, the peaty soft ground somewhere beyond their reach. To his discomfiture, what isn’t visible through the canopy is the road Hannibal disappears down.

What is, however, is the branching head of a stag deer, its tar-black antlers and bulk an absence of things in the trees.

It lies down in the moss, but Will can't see past it. He steps a little into the grass, mindful of the blooms underfoot humming with bees and the contentment of humid warmth.

"Quite alright, Will?"

A hand clasps at his shoulder, much as it did this morning. Will shakes it off, and looks to Hannibal, carrying nothing - whatever needed leaving behind found a home somewhere beyond what the occupants of the car can see. When Will looks back into the woods, the stag is no more than a hillock in the trees, featureless and green.

He stares - not there, never was. "Do you try to sneak up on people like that, or am I just an easy target?" he asks, turning his head back to Hannibal.

"Now if I tell you the truth of that, I'll have no fun at all this week," replies Hannibal, tapping the side of his own cheek with a finger, before putting the hand back up to Will's back, guiding him to the open door of the car. (*How long since he strolled back up? Are you losing it?*)

Will nods, dragging his feet a bit in the pebbly gravel before the asphalt, trying to remember what time the car dash said it was when he exited. "Have yourself a shy violet shrine here?"

Hannibal smiles. "This property shares some bordering hectares with ours, with a lake between us - we have an agreement with each other to hunt the woods here. But yes, there is a wayside cross here, not visible from the road."

"So you'll take your pound of flesh out of the animal population instead of a neatly wrapped bundle by the road?" asks Will.

"Super sanitary, that," adds Beverly. Hannibal just smiles at the cheeky comment, and slides into the driver's seat.

"Another of my errands from yesterday," he explains. "Checking in with the hunting club and ensuring we have paperwork for any hunting trophies. I do hate to be criticized for not

participating in government systems, no matter what my colleagues might suggest. I am not opposed to weighing tusks and antlers and paying out some arbitrary sum to the commonwealth," he says with a high chin. "The family here understands the value of live animals as much as the butcher's cut. I hope none of you are particularly adverse to eating what you kill."

"Cycle of life," says Matthew with a shrug and a slow drawl. "Probably the most ancient rite of humanity, no matter the religion or culture."

"Just so," says Hannibal, and pulls away from the woods. Beverly and Matthew share a look, whereas Alana keeps her eyes rooted to the floor of the car cab. Will, not brave enough to ask and tactful enough to know he shouldn't, wonders what he's missed in those chats across Kaunas and Klaipėda and the handful of other cities he won't remember because he didn't see them. He wasn't invited to that part.

(*You're invited where you're going next. Don't let them take that distinguishment from you. Don't you allow yourself to forget it.*)

Whatever awkwardness is hiding underneath, Hannibal seems to not notice it, and Will doesn't understand it, and insofar as that, he closes his eyes to the morning sunlight streaming into the windshield, and does his best to not look back into the woods to check again for the stag. It wasn't there, he reminds himself. Just a trick of the light.

The stop in Utena is neither notable nor worth noting. It is a small city with all the charming small city things, but also all the mundane ones like corner stores, post offices, primary schools, and ugly pockets of underdeveloped property.

"No lunch plans, but important ones for dinner," Hannibal says, pulling into the parking lot of a gas station. Will marvels at the splash of red and white, the ubiquitous Circle K here even across the ocean from home. "We have served the morning of our first day in service to neighboring waysides, but the first of our feasts is at dusk, when the conjunction is visible. I would be a very poor guide if you missed that and a quick tour before it."

Alana, who's been mostly quiet for the remainder of the ride, perks up at this. "Should I be prepared to take notes?" she asks.

"You should be prepared to participate, Miss Bloom. Our week is on rails from the gates to the house and onwards," Hannibal replies. "Your note taking is only as valuable as you find it to be for yourself."

It's not a stop as much as an opportunity to gas up and wave from the car windows at Brian, who has the look of one who's being boiled alive, sitting next to what looks like an intensely red-headed woman. In the front seat of the modest white Toyota, a stately looking dark-skinned man reads a book, ignoring his riding partners. Nobody talks. Hannibal steps out long enough to coordinate with the driver of the car, a serious looking man with a frown as severe as the cut of his hair, and off they go, civilization fading once more. Power lines disappear, and trees overtake their posts.

The approach to the Lecter manor, after trundling around the backcountry of southern Aukštaitija maintaining small, provincial family sites, is another animal entirely. It's nearly thirty minutes southward with some speed, not quite backtracking now with Brian and the rest of the visitors bumping along behind them in the Toyota, but very nearly in appearance and small, confusing market roads that give way to the occasional farmstead or lake.

They approach the edges of the national park before turning north and eastward on a small unmarked road, something not much better than two long tracks of dirt amidst shale stone, mud, and bright tufts of grass in the scattered light of the sun, diffused by trees. They go on like this more slowly for another half hour in relative silence, the full crew of the cabin watching the terrain and the bends in the road. Will thinks again of children, and summer camp, and the otherness of time the further out of the reaches of the cities they get.

The difference between the beginning of the property and the stops they've taken this morning is immediate and irrefutable. There are at least two dozen such wayside crosses on either side of the long drive into the woods, clean, comely, wreathed at their bases in twined leaves and flowers for the holiday - it's as obvious as Christmas lights or a wreath on the door.

Hannibal doesn't bother to stop. Clearly these are well tended and fed.

(*It's funny how you can tell when someone lives in a house. Each window open, signs of life visible beyond. Somebody pulls into the driveway. The plants unfurl their leaves and listen to your whispering. You miss how that feels on the occasions you've experienced it. You imagine Hannibal, cosmopolitan doctor or not, feels the same sense of homecoming, smiling at the bundles of leaves and brambles clustered at each pole's base. His sister has put out all the ornaments, and that's neither unexpected or strange. The trees bend to hear his instruction - a door awaits to welcome him home, the prodigal son over and over again and unfettered by the miles he drives to get to it.*)

Matthew is the first to crack after the long drive. Tall stone and wrought iron greet them after the crosses as they round a long hedge of viburnum, snowy white with flowers.

"Oh my god, it's a fucking castle. Do we get stuck here avoiding three sisters while you hightail it off to London?"

It's true - the Lecter house is less of a house, and more of a grand estate, hidden in deep forest. The turrets rise even above the tall trees, each of their steeples given a tall celestial cross of their own. Will can understand the feeling of having accidentally stumbled on Dracula's castle. Less ominous, but forgotten by everyone except the inhabitants.

"Well, it's a manor, certainly," Hannibal explains. "The fence isn't exactly designed for siege, so I hesitate to call it a castle, and there's one sister, not three, and she'll likely give me a piece of her mind if I leave for London by boat to try and marry someone in undeath, but otherwise you are spot on Mr. Brown," Hannibal cheerfully states, and Will fights a smile of his own. Just desserts, and all that rot.

Will can see now how they would have drawn the attention of government officials, suspicious of the one-time gentry hosting old pagan traditions. Not very progressive of them, not playing the part of a proud Soviet family. Surely the visit of the Communists that would kill Hannibal's parents was one rooted in envy, seeking to knock the cornerstone from a resistant community of nationalists.

The gate to the house isn't automatic, which despite the fancy car and the dapper suits, seems appropriate for Hannibal. Form over function. But half of the twisting ironwork is open, half

a snake on a house seal staring them down as they cross into the property and the long gravel drive to the estate. The entrance to the home is thrown open, and there, on the few stairs leading in, stands three women all dressed in white, heads wreathed in yellow rue and white linden flowers. (*Matthew laughs, and casts a look at you and Hannibal, like - "see?"*)

Of the three, standing center, a stately woman stands with her cornsilk hair pulled back into the wreathed leaves and braided between them, a large clay pitcher in her hand, and the most inscrutable of thin smiles on her face.

This then must be Mischa.

When Hannibal pulls up in the car and exits, he is much more relaxed, the swagger of a beloved child returned after a long trip. In his work boots and black slacks, he towers over his sister, bringing his hands up to her shoulders to give her a kiss on each cheek.

"Sveika, mano gulbė," he says warmly, looking over her face.

"Sveikas sugrįžęs atgal," she says, smile widening and grey eyes sparkling with mischief. She turns her head to Will, looking for a long moment at him before meeting eyes with the rest of the crew. "And a warm welcome to you as well, our visitors for this very fine June. I began to think you would miss sunset at the rate you were going. Nine missing at the beginning of the week would be inauspicious."

"Or appropriate," he glibly replies. "This is my sister, Mischa, who is more the master of the house than I this week - you will find that most of the rites and traditions are taught and upheld by her as our minister of sorts."

She nods. "We do not have priests in the commonly understood sense - all homes that revere Baltic gods have sacral keepers. It would be more common for Hannibal to hold this distinguishment, but alas, he has filled his head with academic papers, French cuisine and dinner parties abroad, and someone must mind the grove."

"Don't let her fool you," says Hannibal. "She's as capable as any other, especially me, and enjoys it far more."

When Doctor Lecter introduces everyone, Will is interested to put names to faces: Freddie Lounds and Tobias Budge, from UC Berkeley are attending in entirely different capacities - she as a Journalism scholar, and he as a PhD candidate in Folklore and Anthropology. Knowing what he does about Beverly, Matthew and Brian, it's nice to have more people in attendance that aren't digging purely for religious mayhem, though Freddie has a foxy look that he distrusts. She gives him a little thin smile when he watches her.

The George Washington scholars he of course knows, but it's interesting to watch Hannibal explain what each does, what persona he's been fed. If he has any suspicion why a small party of international policy and law students want to spend a long week at his house, he gives no indication to his sister that gives out little compliments as easily as a salesman. "How clever," she calls Beverly. "How lovely your diction and your blue nails!" she says when Alana gives her a pretty Lithuanian greeting. "I appreciate your observance with us," she says to Brian, who is a little bashful of her fine looks and feline grins. "It's always an honor to have new friends at the table."

There's a moment before Hannibal explains Will's presence to his sister that he pauses, like he's considering the right way to present him. Everyone was expected for months, except him - Will, the adrift roommate. Will, who saw something bad and now gets the kind of invites one extends to single neighbors or widowed husbands who don't have somewhere to spend their European Thanksgiving equivalents while their only perceived family enjoys without them.

(*"Hi!" you could interrupt. "I've been invited along because my dad blew his head off and your brother connected that with his gory backstory. Seeing as you're related, I'm sure you do too. Nice to meet you, I'm Will!"*)

Mischa, however, slides her eyes from Will back over to Hannibal with a kind of scrunched nose delight, her freckles folding around her cheeks with her amusement. She must have been a beautiful and wicked child, the kind that laughs and is too clever to be told what to do.

She giggles something to Hannibal in their home language, who remains equally unreadable save for the twinned amused narrowing of his eyes. He replies in kind, more of a rumble than a sentence. Whatever it is, Mischa understands, and blinks her bright eyes with a fiery cunning.

“And this must be Will,” she says. “My brother was very pleased to be able to have someone along for reasons other than thesis projects, though he spoke very highly of your perceptiveness. You are studying forensics and forensic psychology, yes?”

“Ah,” Will nods, scratching at the side of his jaw. Everything in him revolts at the idea of her attention and cryptic foreign words to her brother. Are they making fun of him? Is his presence really a joke after all? “Yeah. Kind of morbid,” he says (*like most things you do*), “especially juxtaposed with your summer celebration of life. Thought I’d make the most of an,” (*escape, detour from a long walk through a tunnel, brief chance to feel like part of the group*), “opportunity to experience something made for living people instead.”

Mischa gives a shrug, and unlike her brother it makes her look younger instead of suave. What comes out of her mouth, however, is substantially less youthful. “Morbidity is insight to know existence leaves a stain,” she says, lilting and light. “Knowing what things stain most deeply is a kind of foresight. I suspect you have both through your education and experience.”

Will’s not quite sure how to respond to that. *Yes, I agree. Yes, it’s not magic, it’s dread informed by knowledge, and the burden of a life watching people fall apart. No, I don’t really want to talk about it.* He swallows around his awkward tongue.

But as easily as a cloud slides out from the sun and the leaves are lit and green again in the summer midday air, she lifts her head and her pitcher. “Though on the matter of stains, and washing them...” she trails on, and Hannibal nods, stepping forward. The girls on either side of her pull out an elaborate woven cloth, a tall bottle, and a wooden cup.

Hannibal puts his hands over the front step of the house, and Mischa pours water over them - it’s the clearest look at Hannibal’s hands that Will has gotten since their acquaintance. The glare of long crescent moons and forked runes in the meat of either thumb glare out as dark eyes, hiding in streams of flowing water, changing the grey stone beneath them. This too splatters onto the surface of the black boots, where the drops find a home with the image of the three dark circles on the leather that Will catches at the park.

(*She undoes your vision of imperfection in Doctor Lecter. Here now is her brother, Hannibal, home for the summer who she’s seen as broken and unhappy as you. Isn’t that a comfort in some way? Not infallible after all.*)

The girl with the cloth, a golden-haired young woman with happy dark eyes, hands it to him to dry his hands, while the other girl, dark-haired and younger than anyone present with a ruin for a neck above her white frock and blessedly recognizable blue jeans, pours and serves the bottled drink in the wooden cup. This is taken gratefully and drained quickly by Hannibal, who only then steps into the doorway of the house, waiting at its frame for the rest of the visitors to follow after.

One by one they rinse their hands and drink their fill - it burns like fire poured down the throat. Only Freddie asks what it is, and the dark-haired girl replies in perfect midwestern English: “An American classic - rye.”

Will gives a little snort, song coming to mind. “ *They say I drink whisky, my money is my own* ,” he says, taking the wooden cup in hand, smelling every bit of the pungent sear of spirits. “ *And them that don't like me can leave me alone.* ” It burns, as expected, but is woodier in taste, a flavor straight from a field.

(*So isn’t this nice - another thing mostly unchanged from one side of the ocean to another, made more intense with your presentness in the moment. You can remember peeling orange labels, “Old Grand Dad” and “Old Crow” and other old things like Beau hiding under the kitchen sink of trailers, apartments, single-wides, but that was then, and this is now.*)

Will walks into the house, and let’s Hannibal guide him through the cold stone mouth of the foyer. The hand feels less foreign every time it’s there, the bones of it falling into the scapula, acromion, coracoid process, miserable trapezius straining against the weight of Will’s own head. He’d like to drink more, have another go at naming the similarities and the differences, but it’s only around noon, and he’s working on making a good impression that he’s not a charity case, to undo whatever it is that Mischa thinks she knows, and Hannibal shares in low tones in secret.

It drives him crazy.

When they begin a tour of the front parlor and the kitchens, very humble despite their remnant Victorian and turn-of-the-20th-century details that hide in carved mantels and ceiling lights and the occasional trophy mounted on the wall, Will turns to Alana.

“What did he say?” Will asks, when they fall a bit away from the group. He doesn’t want to be sensitive, but combined with the pinched look on Alana’s face when he brings it up, and the sly smile on Mischa’s face, he doesn’t think he can go a whole week without knowing.

“I think I probably misunderstood, or it’s an expression,” she shrugs. “She asked if you were a lily growing beneath an oak, and he said a bird sitting in a birch.”

He snorts. “Well that clears it up, doesn’t it.”

Tobias, quiet and observant the whole way through, looks over his shoulder at Will, thoughtful.

Mischa is a very dedicated host, with impeccable diction and humour. In the face of Hannibal’s aberrant normalcy in how he speaks with all of the visitors, Will half-expected her to be the more impenetrable of the two. She is effervescent, easily brought to a good mood, and not at all lost on most pop culture references that Beverly and Freddie drop like it’s their job to do so. She’s in every way a normal thirty-something woman, except everyone in the room is uncomfortably aware she’s considered a dogmatic matriarch of a bronze age religion, and the two are hard to reconcile when she whips out a laptop with a satellite receiver from underneath the center island of the kitchen when she realizes that they are running low on some paper goods in a tour of the pantry.

The pantry itself merits mention - down a long hallway that is cold-stone and dim, save for a few high vent windows with thick bubbled glass. The sheer amount of jars, cans, bottles, and boxes of food definitely speaks to keeping a huge company of people, as do the bright vegetables, fruits, and herbs gathered in bowls and baskets speak to a vibrant farm. But all the same it’s cold, with pathways locked with old doors. (*“A root cellar and a butchering space - best to keep them cold with the doors closed. Wait til I show you the ancient freezer we have, and you’ll understand why we need the especially medieval provision spaces,” Mischa laughs. You look at the daylight glow from the high windows, and rub goosebumps off your arm.*) Something to come back to later.

Back to now.

“No cell towers,” she explains with a sigh, pushing the little antennae attached to the side of the laptop irritably. “We and our neighbors don’t allow such things in our trees, so I apologize that your cell phones will likely be useless save for photographs. However, far be it for me to say we make everything from scratch when we fully embrace toilet paper and online-ordered olive oil and bordeaux with around a hundred people in and out of the house from month to month. Borderline taiga forests and bogs don’t make great presses for grapes or olives,” she laughs, and Will gives a small smile too because it’s such a normal thing to be inconvenienced by.

“Why don’t you want them?” asks Matthew. “With the road and the national park nearby, seems like a pretty arbitrary line to draw.”

Mischa looks at Matthew with a turned head and a smiling face that has Hannibal’s same talent for smooth blankness. “They cut the trees to make way for them. Encourages hikers into family spaces, encourages hunters to trouble our deer and our birds at the water. There are over a hundred places near to us that offer such things - they may have those instead.”

“The grove I assume is what makes the property the anchor point, yes?” asks Tobias, stepping in smoothly. “There’s not a lot on your family’s particular involvement in maintaining religious practices in academic or historical texts, only their inheritance of it around the times of the Baltic Crusades as a concession from the Teutonic Order, but assuming Christianization and Soviet government control, that makes sense that there wouldn’t be much discussion of that.”

Hannibal gives a gesture with his hand when Mischa gives him a look - a question for the professor, not the priestess. “Ownership before that time is ascribed to groups of people rather than landed gentry,” he explains. “My family so happened to be leaders at that point in time, and a land contract is easier to build relationships around than a vague ‘sacred ground’ concept. We lost some hectares during the Communist years - several trees older than much of the American Constitution, but the essentials have always been deep into the heart of the property, and it has been our mission to restore that which was lost.”

“Crusading is a messy business,” says Freddie, recorder in hand, listening intently but seemingly willing to let others lead for the time being.

“Zealotry is a blade that cuts both ways,” Mischa replies easily. “But let me show you anyway,” she adds. “I am always proud to show how we have expanded the grove, and will again this year, should Saulė bless us.”

The back of the house is more expansive even than the front, no gate or stone wall restricting the courtyard that feeds into the tall trees beyond it. There are little gabled extensions from the building with open doors and white curtains where people live their lives as separate as they can from the manor, and long lines of garden and wheat in rows basking in the sunlight. No extra roads, no extra cars - remote and still in the cupped hands of a forest. The east facing grove greets them with a cool undercanopy full of still ripening berries.

They are very proud of their holy grove, the Lecter siblings, one of the few to survive the iconoclast led by Jerome of Prague according to Hannibal. The Lecter family progenitor of the time, the first to be named Hannibal, and to have a Latin name forced on him, had slaughtered the missionaries that had come to cut down the trees.

“Seems like an extreme reaction to some timber,” says Brian, because that’s Brian through and through.

Mischa keeps the same honey-sweet tone she keeps for everyone, like they are students that don’t understand. It’s not intentionally condescending, just necessary - nobody knows the truth of the matter like she does, and now she teaches. “Our gods come to rest in their groves - it is home. Where is your home if it is burnt to the ground, or naught but cornerstones left in the ground where the stumps remain? How can we hear a god’s voice if they cannot pull up a chair and dine with us?”

“All-powerful supernatural forces, weak to having to find new places of worship?” adds Brian, brows raised to hide in the hair that’s fallen into his sweaty brow. The heat makes him irritable - Will kind of wishes he would just go inside, maybe back to the pantry if he’s so miserable. No AC in old stone mansions, but certainly good insulation.

“Dominion requires maintaining a domain,” interjects Tobias. “Believers are an extension of that power.”

“And the believers believe in the divinity of the centennial trees,” concludes Beverly. “So what do you do when someone wants to fell one at a property edge, or thin the grove for fire safety?”

“Tell them no, of course,” says Mischa. “Why would a trivial modern grievance change our values?”

Fair , thinks Will, even as Beverly peers at the bark of a passing birch, dissatisfied.

The paths in the grove are neither paved nor marked - just a smooth trail worn down and packed hard by the movements of people over top for years and years. Ferns, moss, and green bushes crowd its edges in places, and retreat into neatly kept grass in others. It’s the kind of place children would love to play in, or an adult might like to lay down and listen to the birds overhead. The susurration of the leaves above in the breeze is nice, hemming in the sounds of warbling songbirds, crows cawing overhead in the sky. Will thinks he catches sight of a few small grouse running between patches of sunlight on the forest floor.

Will admits the grove has a particular stillness to it that he enjoys - there’s not as much of the still pines and spruces here towards its center, but instead large and leafy trees that have wide trunks and tall reaching branches. The speaking between the party members is muted to him, like it's somewhere down the hall or beneath water. It doesn’t matter all that much to pay attention at this point - Will doesn’t have much interest in the validity of arboreal life over human ones. They’re older, more resilient. He wants to pose the question: why *wouldn’t* they deserve consideration?

(*You’ve never pictured yourself a treehugger. You’re not. You’re not chaining yourself to any in a hurry to save them from the ills of bureaucratic forest management, capitalism, and unremarkable real estate construction. You’re not killing knights from mainland western Europe in Crusades, you’re not saving heritage and places of prayer. But you admire a tree’s witless cunning that tells them to shred themselves apart, or draw into themselves to hide from cold and fire when necessary, and grow back at need.*)

(*Your experience is that people will protect themselves like that, and think they’re smarter than that implies. You too. You most of all. So maybe the trees aren’t witless, just stoically resigned.*)

He ambles away from the group, through the grove down another path that is more shaded - there are two clearings that he can see when he leaves the path, one simply an open round of grass with a tall wayside cross of its own, large and grand and very different from the ones at the front of the property for its simplicity. The other clearing, in deeper shadow still, has a great stone beneath an oak tree.

Will walks to this one, intrigued by knotted hollows in the exceptionally large trunk and branches.

The stone is very white at the top and lonely, and stands about as high as Will's waist rather like a curved table. It has a bowl shaped depression in it's top where water has come to pool, and lichens and moss have come to run up against its edges. The grass is uncut around it, dew still clinging to the tall blades and glinting weakly in the sunlight that escapes the oak tree's arms, but a ringed path has been furrowed into the ground relentlessly, hard packed and black clay for a foundation.

When he bends to look into the stone basin, he looks about what he expects himself to look like - tired, a little sun-fevered, squinting past the dark sediment beneath the surface to fixate on the reflection instead.

Something flickers over head: *cu-coo, cu-coo.*

He turns, leaning on his elbows to look up between the branches and wavering leaves. The rock, ice cold in its sunless circle, chafes at the skin of his arms with coarse lichen, hardness of the stone pressing against the bottom of his spine. Will ends up leaning back, bent in an arch, watching the flicker of clouds instead of wings. *Cu-coo, cu-coo, cu-coo.*

Will finds himself smiling - Hannibal's promised cuckoo. (*"I see you have found your counterpart," he tells you, satisfied somehow.*) The oak tree is too tall to catch a proper glance at the bird, but he's certain that's what it is. This then must be the tree he was talking about yesterday. What other could be more old and massive than this one?

His grandmother had a cuckoo clock, back when he visited and Beau hadn't moved them north yet to get away from things that reminded him of Will's mother. Broken, the weights

overwound one too many times, but too beloved to be tossed. She winds the clock for him to see it with a little brass key. It wasn't much, just a little whistling brown and red mouthed blob of a wooden bird, but the sound is unmistakable, uncanny in how much the little whistle matches the reality of the animal above. There's a deeper resonance to it from the echoing canopy of the trees, less immediate, but bone-deep present.

"I see Will has an eye for the good stuff," comes from the edge of the clearing. Freddie, red-haloed and sidestepping little mounds of yellow and white meadow flowers. "Already sick of the tour, or just getting to the heart of the matter?"

Will stretches his arms, sitting back up abruptly as the others join her. His stomach does a little flip at Mischa's grey-eyed scrutiny, too similar to the front of the house. Hannibal is nowhere to be seen, though so too are Tobias, Brian, and Beverly missing. Maybe looking at the other clearing?

"Is that an actual offering stone?" he hears Matthew over his shoulder. "I thought the one near Klaipėda was the only really notable one, but this is huge."

"Here since our house was built, and likely thousands of years before that," says Mischa, striding through the grass, running white hands across the surface of the stone, like she's petting a well-loved dog, checking for snarls and marks in its moss coat. "While I'm sure you have wild ideas of us dancing naked around it or some such Protestant pagan stereotypes, especially with it's sister being called a devil stone, it's a fair bit less interesting than that," she shrugs. "At least for what you'll likely see. I'll save the explanation for later, when we have use for it in a couple days if you have a need," she says with a wink.

"And what we don't see?" asks Alana, strolling around the edges of it the same way she strolled the park this morning. (*Was that only this morning? Yes, you think, what a long day, solstices and sunlight hours aside.*) "Something not related to Rasos?"

"A sight for those who have need of it," Mischa replies again, subject closed.

Matthew and Freddie visibly deflate, but Mischa turns to smile at Will. "The cuckoos are shy of company except for each other and the trees who they talk to, but I see you've found one of them anyway. A very confused boy, singing in the middle of the day like this."

“What, you mean they don’t actually keep time?” Will jokes half-heartedly, looking back up to where he thought he had seen it.

“They most certainly do,” says Mischa, “just not the hourly kind, though they wind themselves up into a proper frenzy the later in the spring it gets and start singing at all hours. As you Americans have your groundhog, or the Germans have a badger, we have the cuckoo to sing that spring is here, and storks coming back to nest. We are very fond of our birds.”

“And your trees,” Will says with a quick smile.

“And our feasts, and our pageantry. I’d say we generally like things and take care of them,” She smiles, privately amused. “As a reward, we are provided for.”

Will nods, but frowns. Alana, now to his right, nods as well. This is her kind of thing, he thinks with a glance to her. Community, small agriculture, surprisingly progressive and regressive female leadership in a single package. He met her mother once, a salt-and-pepper haired dame with a throaty laugh and strong hands from years of yardwork and raising boys and a sharp girl. Alana’s criticalness of traditional homes always struck him as self-critical. Will’s glad she’ll probably enjoy this, in the company of others or not.

It’s all foreign to him. Grateful, generational work. Having history, roots if you will, he thinks with a pointed laugh to himself. The handwashing and taking shots at the door is a bit much for first-time meetings, but he’s not traveled before. Maybe this is all normal, and he’s just always been too young to have similar experiences with his father growing up, too broken off from people to have rituals like that. He watched as Beau and other hunters took shots of things before deer and bird hunts to welcome each other, and maybe it’s not so different from that after all.

(*You’ve just never participated in the social parts. Surprise, surprise.*)

Mischa goes to the looming tree, hand brushing over harsh bark, unflinching as it scratches at her palms. “The oak is not the first in the grove but the largest living - planted to mark its center in the 1400s. Hannibal is better with the why and the how, but for our purposes, it’s an

old friend and a place of safety. There are others between here and the house, but we'll make crowns from this one during the week for being so old and wise."

"But come," she says, grinning and freckled. She's older than them, but she doesn't feel it, just as bright faced as a child on summer vacation. "Hannibal will have brought your friends back to the house, and there's work to be done for tonight. Flower crowns and wreaths are for the night before the solstice's zenith, and goodness knows I'm not ready to feed over eighty people tonight. I need to look over what you've brought me from your drive this morning and see what's to be done with it."

They follow her out of the clearing, and Will gives a brief listen for the bird before leaving with them. It's quiet, but he makes a note to come back out later and see if he can't catch sight of it.

a linden has nine branches

It's Will's mistake that he really doesn't think about what "sunset" actually means this far north and at this time of year. In Hannibal's company the day before, it's of no consequence as fast friends amongst strangers - they talk about the university, and travel spent abroad, and the older man's resolute fondness for the American east coast even against the contrast of Vilnius, and the sun moves westerly without consequence or time.

"The Chesapeake Bay is shallow enough to walk across its waters in a huge amount of its range. Did you know?" he recalls Hannibal asking at the time. "Just up to the chin, something to carefully navigate with the wisdom of your feet, akin to navigating a crowd of people. Keep your head up, trust your step, and you needn't tread water."

Will doesn't know this, or he didn't, but he warmed a little to the idea that maybe Hannibal feels the same around others, perilously navigating snares, and sea grass, and unexpected pit falls. He thinks the sun was still up at that moment. There were red geraniums nodding round warmed heads into the streets from their window boxes. He doesn't worry about being awkward, or if Hannibal is bored with his company, or if he needs to be mindful of what he says, or where he steps right now, in that moment.

Now, left adrift and as a stranger amongst friends, Will resents the axis tilt of the earth. It seems rude to ask how long the wait will be, seeing as the end of the day is inevitable, and he can see with his own two eyes that it is, in fact, *not* evening yet. But the more he considers it, the more he remembers the twilight dark of the northern hemisphere in the summer days, that there's not a traditional night but more something like darkest hours in a long series of days.

(*You haven't thought a lot out about this trip. You're here so you don't have to think.*)

"So when *do* we actually move the festivities along?" asks Beverly, rocking back and forth in her laced hiking boots that have gathered burrs in the tall grass, because she doesn't have a single awkward bone in her body. Everyone's thinking it, so really she's just cutting through the crap she doesn't have patience for. Between questions, she is chewing away at a piece of

cucumber, lathered generously in honey. It tastes just like a mellow afternoon, and both of them are surprised to like it.

"After fucking 9 o'clock," Freddie grouses, looking at the time on the front of her phone. She checks it a lot like this, a person used to having one in hand and ready. She sighs on occasion, presumably when she realizes there's no signal, and no obvious wireless internet. "We've literally been put out to pasture while they unload the cars and do all the stuff we're *supposed* to be out here to see."

"Got somewhere specific to be?" asks Brian with a snort, arms crossed and sweating. By all rights it's a pleasant day compared to the heat of Louisiana or Alabama summers, but Will has to remind himself occasionally not everyone is acclimated to discomfort. Global warming and all that.

"I had hoped at some point to be at dinner, preferably without a babysitter," she retorts, eyeing the two white-bloused figures ahead of them, pushing her curly red hair back over a narrow shoulder. "I didn't anticipate the Spanish-style dining experience, but I guess my bad for not making the connection between celestial religious ceremony and the meal program being on the same timetable, you know, as you do."

Will rolls his eyes, and hides a snort of his own in a sigh. He would have preferred to go with Hannibal, but hates the idea of being underfoot, so with the research group he stays. Nothing but coolers and additional supplies to arrange he's told. More chores. Mundane. They'll see everyone in a few hours when everything is more impressive, he's told with a wink.

Their little band of Americans are enjoying the sight of a pond in the low reaches of a grassy hill, furrows of grain and trellises of vegetables and berries in rows rolling down towards it. There's not an obvious path, only freshly tilled dark dirt, which tracks easily underfoot. The light has gone golden with the passing of the day, but with another two hours to go until dinner and no religious leaders to direct their interests, there's an anxious itchy feeling in Will's feet.

(*Just leave them. Explore where you want. They did for a whole week, while you stared at the popcorn ceiling of your apartment, playing music loudly enough to not think about being alone - you bet the Lecters wouldn't care if you walked off just the same. There's plenty to see, a vast network of forest and wetlands and strange furrows in the woods that are old, and the only thing keeping you from all of it is the other people around you.*)

Will stalls out a bit, watching the sheen of the afternoon sun on the edge of a red bell pepper at that thought, before his eyes rest on the white blouses again, dove-bright.

Hannibal and Mischa left them to their own devices, but with a little aid - the babysitters, as Freddie complains. The two girls that accompany Mischa when they arrived earlier are tasked with walking the rest of the property with them and answering questions where they can - most of the interesting ones are sensitive: “Is it true that you have to stay on the property”, “are you poaching territory next to the national park”, “why are your offerings buried, isn’t that atypical, isn’t that weird.”

Most of the interesting are deferred, with smiles from one and teenage moroseness from the other: “I don’t know much about that”, “oh, not really something I’m involved in”, “that’s a good question for Hannibal.” They do their best, but even Will can start to understand Matthew and Brian’s skepticism when there’s a gate for every gate of information, and they all arrive at the doorstep of the Lecter siblings, who dodge specifics by providing alternative ones.

Of the two girls, one is long haired and vividly blonde - to Will’s embarrassment and surprisingly Alana, Beverly, and Brian’s as well, this is Jurgita, Hannibal’s assistant. Her English diction is perfectly understandable as any cashier in the Giant Eagle grocery down the road from their apartment back home, despite aptitude with Lithuanian - distinctly east coast, maybe Pennsylvanian. She has a shy smile and dark, wide eyes.

“Oh gosh,” she says, combing her hair with her fingers absently when asked why she’s here, why’s a country girl doing research and medical clerical work in Northern Europe, “Doctor Lecter changed my life - I met him at Johns Hopkins when he was doing rounds as an attending with students and offering differential diagnoses,” she shrugs. “They used to use me as a curveball for new residents when I came in for treatment that first month - unusual symptoms, atypical presentation. He’s the one that helped narrow down what was wrong...he used to tease I was too bright to be in a hospital bed, like sun trapped behind a cloud.”

She blinks, fingers still working through tangles. “I’m better now, but I spent a long time in that bed.”

“And a long time talking with Doctor Lecter,” Will intuits with a nod. That makes sense - a favorite patient, someone sharp that would have the time and inclination to listen to Hannibal’s stories between bouts of illness.

“It’s normal to get attached to people who become our stability,” Alana says. “Everybody needs a rock to stand on in a surge.”

Jurgita seems to think this is funny. “Probably,” she smiles, “good thing Doctor Lecter isn’t one to get attached. Mischa’s the one that teaches us the most, though it’s probably not realistic to ever become as knowledgeable in our practices here as someone born into it.”

“You sometimes adopt names,” says Tobias, more than he asks and seeing something he wants answered. “When you come from somewhere else - Francis was telling us about it on the drive from Kaunas.”

“When we’re ready,” she nods. “If we ever are. Foreign members don’t have a spiritual birthright to the land here the way that some like Hannibal and Mischa do, or the old families that come to celebrate with us on the seasonal holidays, but it’s a small change we can do to adopt our new beliefs and fit in a bit more. Abigail here has only been with us since last summer, so she’s still using her original name.”

(*Hannibal has a second name, you recall. “Perhaps someday I’ll tell you mine,” he had said, he had promised.*)

Abigail, the dark-haired one, baby-faced and sulky as any young woman has a right to, shies away from the entire group where she can. She doesn’t have the same comfort in questions that Jurgita does, a seasoned assistant who’s likely done this tour a dozen times. Even now she keeps to the edges of the field, fingers turning tomatoes on the vine, picking a small light green one with what must be rot on its underside. Not quite sent to the kid’s table, but as good as having been with her and Jurgita’s clutch of foreign students. Will makes a note to talk to her later - he’s not brave enough yet to ask about her neck, hiding damage above the embroidered collar of her frock, but maybe sometime this week with someone who knows the story he’ll find his bluntness again.

“Names are important,” Alana says with crossed arms gone a little tan in the summer sun, looking down towards the pond that’s glassy gold and speckled with little ducks on its

surface. “How did you know when it was time to shed yours?”

“When the old me died,” Jurgita says, still smiling as her eyes trace the path of a bird on the water’s edge. “First day of my discharge. Didn’t recognize the world from one side of the ICU to the other. I lost most things while I was sick, including my parents. The only thing that was still familiar was Doctor Lecter on my release date. Took me to dinner when his shift was over - I think I waited in the surgery lobby for two hours. Said we should celebrate. My own father didn’t do that for me.”

(*You can picture it - blue scrubs, expensive sweater pulled over the top to be more comfortable but still a familiar sight, opening the car door to his patient who’s leaving the hospital with a lavender bag full of scant belongings and no luggage to hide it in. Not too different from leaving prison, or foster care. Maybe a little of both when you don’t know if you can ever get away from four walls and a picc line. You wonder what Hannibal considers a celebratory dinner.*)

She combs her hands through her hair more industriously, twirling loose strands into little braids and out again. It probably tangles more than it straightens, but maybe that’s the idea. She never runs out of things to occupy her hands with.

“I knew I would follow him anywhere when he asked if I needed somewhere to stay. What’s losing a name at that point?” she asks, mind somewhere else.

“Just some paperwork,” says Will. When he looks up to see her, she’s smiling again, looking into and through him. If she’s impressed or offended by his insight, he couldn’t say. She has a timelessly round happy face, but unlike Mischa’s bright eyes that bring an alien cunning to her features, Jurgita’s are kind.

“I had a friend that tried to bring me back home a few years ago, around midsummer, but I ended up making the decision to stay here permanently. I changed my name around then, and legally renounced my American citizenship. Nothing to it,” she concludes. “Just embracing a new family.”

Maybe Hannibal Lecter has a talent for finding disenfranchised young people. It’s a little disappointing, he has to admit, hearing Jurgita’s story like this even as it’s a relief to not be singled out. Their tragedies are different, but the idea is the same. It could have been a

recovery from cancer, or abandonment at coming out, or the end of a long, abusive relationship and he would have sniffed Will out for the uncollared animal that he is, sniffing around alleys, looking for something to shelter in.

(*Does Hannibal have gentle, confident hands for all the faithless little boys and girls? Does he get out the shepherd's hook and herd them to his sister to keep them happy and entertained? You thought maybe you had a connection in the violence through which your parents are transformed and erased, but apparently erasure is a theme, not a unique piece of work.*)

"So what was wrong with you?" Will asks, when his voice finds him again. At the askance look on Beverly and Alana's faces, Will shakes his. "What put you in the hospital?"

"Oh I couldn't see faces," she says. "Couldn't recognize people, got bad enough that I couldn't even recognize myself, like a bad early-onset dementia. My parents did their best, until they didn't. Too many differing opinions, none had a happy ending. It's fine these days as long as I'm medicated, but people don't like to deal with things like that."

"No," says Will. "They don't."

None of the others really have a response to that. He thinks he can imagine guilt waft off them like heat mirages off asphalt, but realistically they'll forget this awkwardness in a few hours time, like all the other ones, or saved to be talked about in private with no Will to overhear.

It's Hannibal that comes to find them eventually, crossing the field to whisper something to Abigail before she runs back to the house, relieved of her hosting duties. His outfit has changed - all black still, yes, but made of breezy linens with careful stitchery in red, green and white at the seams of the sleeves and down a blocky v at the front. Will feels like he should feel differently about him after hearing Jurgita's story, now that he's sunk into the skin of being the new charity case, but he doesn't - he pictures instead the two of them wading in reeds, waters of the Chesapeake wide on either side.

Will further embarrasses himself by staring overlong at the doctor's clean-shaven neck, where he knows there's no water up to the chin, but there is hair peeking between from the collar of the tunic, just as silvered and chameleon in color as his carefully styled mane. He brings to mind the wolf in Grandmother's clothes - it's only the company of others that keeps Will from teasing "my, what big teeth you have."

(*You suspect he'd find that funny, or curious. You already think part of his persona is a front - what else can you guess with your bird-sharp eyes and tongue?*)

Hannibal must see something of this is his face - he gives an appraising look, the heavy kind that precedes something said that actually means nothing. He's good at that. He doesn't do it to Will, letting Will guide a lot of the conversation between them, but four hours into a car ride with pleasant nothings as a murmuring background, Will comes under the impression he does it quite a lot to others.

"Thinking too much again, Will?" he asks.

Will flinches at the phrasing.

(*A piercing thought: he thinks you a clever boy and that's what you're here for - not to be the sad diaspora of the South's broken men, not a mark for religious conversion. Those things just are unfortunate coincidences. Convenient details. Same difference. You're here for him.*)

(*What does that even* ***mean*** *?*)

"Have the girls been starving you out in a field full of crops?" he teases. "You all have a hungry look. Which is good," he adds. "Hunger is a good place to start. Hunger's what drives us to be productive and fruitful during the year."

"Is the wardrobe change mandatory for dinner, or is this a jeans-appropriate meal?" asks Brian, giving skeptical looks to Hannibal's outfit, ironically more so than the plaid monstrosities the good doctor lectures in, but trying to pass for what's polite by his measure.

“Mr. Zeller, I would ask no one to be anything other than themselves this week,” Hannibal replies with an amused look. “If you find yourself craving a flax-spun shirt, we shall certainly accommodate, but you are guests, and guests are entitled to comfort until the very moment it’s time to leave.”

Will has half a mind to ask for one just to make it uncomfortable for Brian - it would be nice to see someone else go twitchy-handed and quiet in the company of others. He’s half-sick of it himself.

“Would it be inappropriate to participate that way?” asks Alana, mouth pursed. Will can see where her thoughts are running, a sort of wholehearted “when in Rome” that he’s always found attractive. Themed outfits. Light research before meals with visiting scholars so she never lacks something to talk about with them. She should be an ambassador, or a politician.

She would look very pretty dressed like Abigail and Jurgita. She would enjoy the full experience. It’s what she was looking for, right?

“I encourage it, if you’d like,” he nods kindly. “If you head back to the house and find my sister at the kitchen nook where she keeps her ledger, she’ll set you to rights for the night, and likely the rest of the week if she can persuade you to take a stack of clothes.”

Freddie and Beverly decline, Beverly a consummate believer in pants, and Freddie incredibly uncomfortable with wearing the “convent outfit”, but Alana says a thank you and begins a trot back to the house with Jurgita in her company, who’s pleased for the companionship and to ask about what sort of colors that she likes and talk in fading voices over the hill - they weave and embroider things themselves, yes, Audra from down south sends things as Hannibal said, yes, she’d be happy to show her a loom and the dye house, no, it’s not really just women’s work, please don’t worry about those kinds of things out here, Mischa’s arguably more in charge than anyone.

(*“Don’t let her fool you,” says Hannibal. “She’s as capable as any other, especially me.”*)

Will bends his ear to that. That merits more consideration than he had given it.

The group begins to shuffle through the high grasses to the manor, called by the promise of their first proper meal at the house, and what that will mean. Tobias has several opinions ranging around traditions that coexist around the entirety of the Baltic Sea. Freddie, Beverly, and Brian don't care as long as it's all properly cooked and nothing fermented can be seen as far as the eye can see. Matthew, as he often does, says nothing and doesn't show his hand any more than he needs to.

Will drags a bit behind to paint a picture of the sun riding at the edge of the treetops, still searing little bright discs into his eyes. There's a lot about here that's idyllic, but Mischa is still something of a mystery to him - akin to her brother in many ways, a little grinning girl in others. Hannibal is a mystery too when it comes down to it, he supposes.

Hannibal waits at a reasonable distance, watching and tracing with his own eyes. When Will turns back to him, lifting his feet high to avoid tufts of green rye and meadow rue, he ponders a question, tastes the appropriateness on a tongue still sweet with honey, and sighs.

"Your home is really very...lived in. Lively, I guess," he tries to explain, scratching at the back of his head. "I don't know what I'm trying to say. I guess I've never experienced something like it myself. I'm still trying to understand the dynamics though. Playing second-fiddle?" asks Will, arms crossed with a wry look. "Doesn't seem your style."

"I wish to see my sister pleased in all things," Hannibal nods. "There's not much I wouldn't do for her, and providing for her is my responsibility, in whatever capacity. Family is important."

"New members, stable income, dinner guests and researchers, roadside upkeep assistance, literal meat from hunting," Will lists off. "What do you get in return?"

Hannibal's head turns back to the treeline - he flexes a hand casually, stretching tendons and muscle like he'd like to pop the joints. Will only notices when the tattoos shift under the pull of it. His eyes are very golden in the afternoon sun when he looks back, face a blank slate with all the fine detail of a statue and none of the emotion, like he's chased it down the field to hide in the forest.

"Inevitability brings me what I want," he says, lightly. "I have been patient. I have been awarded for my clarity of purpose."

“That doesn’t really answer the question, but it’s very philosophical of you,” Will replies with a small smile, staring down at the white tip of a shoe, where underneath five toes are splayed and curious about the dirt further still beneath the sole, the tilled soil, and the fragrant loam of fertile earth.

“No,” says Hannibal, a little low but quick. “I suppose it wouldn’t to anyone other than me. But I’ve got the doctorate in philosophy, yes? Let me concern myself with the whys and you can hand out your portentous who’s and when’s,” he smiles with a honey-thick mouthful of words of his own.

The front drive of the house is transformed in the hours since their arrival - tables laid out in clusters of four around a large pile of fresh lumber that is stacked in the central ring of the cobbled drive. With the white cloths, careful array of water glasses, silverware, toasting crystal cups, and red candles wreathed in leaves up and down the tabletops, Will can picture the fireglow at night, glinting off fork tines, wet-mouths, the fibers of napkins and long expanses of linen. Behind it all, the sky is pinking with the beginnings of sunset, yellow and gold in the thin high clouds over the trees. Somewhere, inside the house, there is singing.

Everything out and ready - all the decorations present, because it’s expected year over year, not because getting the old blown-glass painted ornaments is representative of the last best effort. They live a dressed-down existence that calls for extravagance to celebrate a good year. This is not a Last Supper. The melody from inside the house is distracting, the voices weaving in and out of each other, but it’s not the hum of a TV in Daddy’s living room, playing the same old shows. Will can take a beer and go to bed and wake up to another day of the same.

He reminds himself to blink. He does this because people are watching and don’t understand him when he does this kind of walking meditation, even with context.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” says Hannibal, to his right, too close to his ear. Will feels himself stumble a bit to turn and make room.

He looks again, craning his neck. “All the pieces are out for a special moment, the pause before the first intake of air,” Will says after a moment, eyes darting back to the tables. It’s vague enough that he doesn’t worry about an interrogation. Even double-doctorate Hannibal Lecter can’t know why that’s important to him. “What are they singing about?”

Hannibal listens for a moment, head barely turning to parse the lilting tune from the windows of the manor. He smiles. “A folk song, in a polyphonal style we call sutartinės. Hence, the singers weaving between each other’s lines…” Hannibal listens for another measure of song. “A linden tree has nine branches, and they break in a storm. The voices are praying for one to be spared so that the cuckoo has one to land on.”

Will feels a mild warmth, despite the morbid story. “Our fateful friend strikes again. Did Mischa tell you I found one?”

“We are bound to our natures,” Hannibal nods, “and sometimes bound to our habitat. They’ve nested for many years in the grove, between a stand of birch on the north end of the property and the oak’s hollow. A shy guest, that one.”

The singing continues - not sung by anyone Will knows, all of them accounted for in the courtyard. It’s disorienting, these moments between equilibrium and realizing he’s not in DC, or Alabama, or any place in between, even if parts look the same.

He changes the subject. “Does it get hot, with the bonfire in the middle?”

“Not much of a stand-in for the sun’s heat if it can’t warm hands, pink the skin, and burn away weak things, yes?” Hannibal asks, smiling like he’s pleased with himself. “I would apologize for it, but it will be a recurring theme every night, and I fear you will get tired of hearing my voice. Something you may find true regardless,” Hannibal says with a nod. “For a second fiddle, I do seem to end up with the lion’s share of speaking duties.”

“What would you do without me?” comes the teasing reply, Mischa now in a red vest over her own white dress and a number of elaborate ties at the waist. Her crown of rue is the same, though refreshed, and given more volume by green tufts of unripe rye between flashes of yellow flowers. “Is it not enough that I must do the talking for the other two meals a day? And the instructions for all the rest? It must be nice to drive up last minute with all the

offerings and a handsome young man and look like the master of ceremonies, and know you'll have the best time out of everyone this year like this is a work retreat."

Hannibal says something quick and biting in their mother tongue, to which Will can only tell that they are messing with each other - there's a passive annoyance and joy Will's not personally familiar with as an only child, but timeless and placeless in the face of close kin. Mischa shrugs, hands rolled up in surrender. Her mouth, like her vest, is very red and pointed with her sickle-thin smile. She flounces away, content with whatever point she's made.

(*You've never had a sibling - maybe something of one in Beverly, but the inside jokes, the brutal fondness, the tacit forgiveness...you don't really expect to know what that's like in your lifetime.*)

"You'll have to forgive Mischa," Hannibal says, directing Will with a hand on his shoulder towards the tables. "She has a terrible and inappropriate sense of humor."

Will scratches his neck, unbothered save for the flush of embarrassment he feels at Hannibal even feeling the need to explain. "Can't really complain about attractive Europeans calling me handsome, or I'm never going to find something to be happy about. If that's your idea of terrible, I struggle to think of what is actually loathsome."

"Rudeness, primarily," Hannibal answers easily. "I cannot abide ignorance or ungratefulness."

"Then allow me to be the first to toast you as a wonderful host, before you send me away for being unappreciative, assuming we're having drinks tonight."

Hannibal parks him in a chair, hands clasped over his shoulders, where Will can see Freddie across from him. Her eyes are watchful, and the hands pressed against him feel illicit in her view. There are seats aplenty for the rest of the foreigners who stroll around the grounds in a drove, comfortable in each other's company but not the rest of the milling crowd.

"More than you can likely handle, which I encourage," says Hannibal, paying Freddie no mind. "The hallmark of the first night is excess after a long period of restraint. Tonight we

celebrate in the fullness of our ninety seats."

Sure enough, each table accommodates 9 people, ten spokes on a wheel with one person seated facing the center at the end.

When he steps back, there's an apologetic look to his face. "I would have you sit with me, but tonight's placement is important," he explains, "and Mischa is particular about these kinds of things."

"Far be it for me to ruin a well thought out seating chart," Will shrugs. "Probably better to put me with all the other visiting people anyway. I'd hate to subject your friends and family to me oscillating between being the weird quiet guy and pointed commentary."

"Au contraire," Hannibal says with another smile, every bit as feline as his sister's. "I think you'll find we're all quite interested in it. I merely beg your patience in the meantime. Duties to observe, people to mind, old words to recite, all that sort of nonsense that's insisted upon. I only get to do this twice a year," he adds cheekily.

He turns to leave when people begin making their way to the tables, sky going darker as the minutes pass, but turns to look back again, looking like a shadow in the candlelight and dying sunset.

Hannibal's mouth goes flat, but his eyes are bright. "Once that's passed, you can run your mouth all you'd like, and my ear will bend to listen. I did say I had an interest in your insights. You'll find that unchanged."

Will doesn't really know how to answer that other than silence.

(*The opposite. You always offer the opposite of what's asked for.*)

Everyone crowding for a chair feels remarkably like Easter Sunday and Easter luncheon in an old parish church. Will forgives this as best he can - religion can't help its strange timekeeping and mechanical crowds, moving in and out of spaces to fill and listen in.

It's undoubtedly more beautiful in presentation than the Baptist functions he experiences in far and few between Sundays growing up - fresh flowers, glass bottles of amber drink, young and old faces who's eyes glint wetly in summer's fading daylight and white clothes are alive and shifting in the dark, waiting for a sign to properly begin. No ugly folding chairs here, or the smell of mildew in aging banquet hall ceiling boards gone yellow with humidity. No well-to-do ladies who lunch together acting as a committee to direct a reluctant congregation, or modest glass casserole dishes and plastic punch bowls to feed the assembly. Daddy's not a religious man, but he is a guilty one, and these are things he's raised to believe are some sort of absolution, and he passes that down to Will in half-hearted attempts at tradition.

(*If he really believed in it, do you think you'd have a different perspective?*)

Maybe all of those things *are* here, and his ears are deaf to the reality of it, spoken in curling Lithuanian between elderly practitioners and young adherents that this is all familiar to. Maybe Will has been sat down like a child to watch, and it's only the names and decorations that change from one religion to the next.

(Y *ou did warn others and yourself of your doubt. You want to stick your hands in Christ's bleeding sides before calling him Savior. For the Lecters and their adherence to Baltic fate, you want to see a man's life measured in cuckoo calls and death take him in proper accordance. You demand blood in exchange for your understanding. You don't care about the details.*)

Everyone remains standing, until eventually the pink of the sky goes purple, then blue and blackening, and the Lecter siblings walk from the great door of their home, a torch between them. They walk next to each other with ease, feet in step, and Mischa drops her arm to stand at the chair facing the pyre closest to her. Hannibal continues onward with the torch and a hand full with a linen wrapped object, stopping at the edge of the wood pile, observing the shape of it until he nods, like it pleases him. The professor once more, looking over his hall, confident in his placement in front of a podium. The surgeon again, center ring of the operating theater, holding the tool of incision aloft. He waits until the quiet mutterings between people fall away.

His voice is a thunderclap, somewhere deep inside. It shocks Will how insistent the feeling is that he should listen.

“Another year in its fullness has passed, and the week of our bounty and feasts has come again at last,” begins Hannibal, torch high and cheeks sepulchral as the shadows hide his eyes. “And you, faithful to the force and words that have existed before the Romans came to Gaul, before Christ met his cross, when mankind was only learning how to use metal instead of his bare hands...welcome.”

Utter silence, all faces transfixed to Hannibal, pacing the center with the red-white flame. Will can’t imagine a person daring to cough and interrupt.

“Welcome home,” he continues. “Welcome to a sight you’ve seen a dozen of a dozen times, or the first in your life with us. In five days from tonight, the mother sun will reach out as close as she can, as she does year over year. People within our home and in the lands bordering the Baltic Sea will put on their wreaths, drink their wines and bake bread in celebration, under the gaze of a day with many names,” Hannibal pauses.

“Here,” he says louder still, “in a place where it has always been observed, St.John’s Day seeks to disguise it’s predecessor - Rasos, our summer solstice, the name we preserve as the dew on the leaves. This year is blessed by the conjunction of three of Saulė and Mėnulis’ children. Vakarinė, Indraja, Vaivora ride out together for the short nights of this week, and we will meet them as a thankful host. Nine feasts for our visitors, three to each.”

“As in all families, year over year, we say goodbye to some, and hello to new blood. Children are born, the old go to rest, and we adopt those that would join us in our celebration of life. Among us this year, we also meet our young American friends, who have travelled far to meet our visitors as well and learn what it is that makes us stronger year over year,” and here he nods to their table. “Please make them as welcome at our fire tonight as you would your sisters and brothers. They complete our numbers and make this observance possible as a gathering of ninety.”

“In the spirit of greetings and farewells tonight, my sister and I ask that you raise your glasses of mead, the last of Katherine’s works as our apiarist, our first,” he continues, gesturing to a woman that comes to stand between the east-facing table and the pile of wood in his pacing

circle. “She has worked hard these past twenty years, among the original pioneers joining us from other places, and I have yet to meet another person more apt to her mead craft. She has taught some of the younger members at our table tonight, but we regret her future absence. You will never have another glass that is kin to hers. It’s remnants we will bury with a linden, and begin anew.”

The torch, largely distracting between Hannibal’s words and the crackling heat flickering mere inches away from Hannibal’s hair, crackles once more when he brings it in front of him and Katherine walks up to grab it above his closed fist. It’s too far away to hear, but he says something to her, mouth hidden behind shafts of dried wheat that she’s crowned in. She nods, happily smiling. He lets go of the bottom of the torch, and she pulls it back to herself and strides backwards again to the wood pile.

“Her own decision to pass the title,” Alana whispers absently from Will’s side, eyes gone glossy with the fireglow. “I couldn’t hear what he said, but someone mentioned it in the house.”

The woman, Katherine, throws the flaming branch to the pile - it ignites easily, soaked as it is in oil. The smell is like a searing campfire, with all their chairs and tables pulled around it to watch and laugh into the night. It would be more friendly were it not for the specific shape of the ring around it.

Katherine, rather than looking satisfied, is instead resigned, stringy hair a halo of white in the growing pyre. Hannibal passes the wrapped object to her, and says something else beyond anyone’s understanding. His face is mostly shadows, turned just so away from the flame. She holds it only for a moment, before she tosses this in as well.

(*Who does foreigner Katherine break bread with on her last night of distinguishment? What does twenty years in service to someone else’s religion look like when it’s over? Retirement is treated like a shiny trophy back home, but what does the end of useful work look like to a destiny obsessed faith?*)

“Her decision to do something,” Will mutters, and watches as she retreats into the shadows beyond the ring to wherever her seat is. Will wants to crane his neck and find her.

Hannibal watches the flames grow, before turning towards his sister's table. "So begins our nine days. Eat well tonight. The feast is life. You put the life in your belly and you live."

He smiles, wide and pleased.

"God gives us teeth - god provides the bread," he concludes, with a charming curl of his lips and eyes squinted against the blaze in front of him, and everyone raises their glasses of amber liquor. When they drink it, Will stares into the sky's twilight dark void, and feels eyes on him. He doesn't look.

The drink is sweet, and goes down easily.

Katherine, as it turns out, sits at the head of their table, with a frowning man to her right named Jokūbas, both crowned in the same dried wheat sheaves, specially prepared and unique to them for the night. She very merrily talks about beekeeping and her education in yoga in the 1970s, and a short-lived career in acupuncture, while Jokūbas keeps to himself. He squints a lot. With his blonde hair and serious face, no one's quite sure if this is because he speaks no English, or if he's disdainful of their company, or a mixture of the two.

Will tells himself it doesn't matter - he doesn't have anything to say to them.

Jokūbas looks at Will with something that might be curiosity, but has a strange consideration to it, pointed and probing in a way that makes Will avoid faces and instead take pour after pour after pour of the mead which is easy to drink, and easy to lose count of.

It makes him warm and smiling and even Alana and Beverly are giggling with him between jokes about her costume for the night, a long shift dress with blue sewn down the sleeves, like a costume out of a period drama. "Airy," she says, "but regrettably no pockets."

Will looks between the flames and the tables, where everyone else seems equally deep in their cups, save Hannibal and Mischa. Mischa laughs, because she is of a laughing disposition, and Jurgita laughs with her because they are cut from a similar cloth, even if they aren't made of the same things.

Hannibal simply watches, eyes cutting from table to table. Will feels a certainty that he looks at everyone, because everyone is subject to observance, weighing, and evaluation.

(*What is he evaluating? What is the weight of one human in a group of ninety?*)

They briefly meet eyes - Hannibal only raises a glass, face inscrutable and Will does the same. He owed him a cheers anyway, Will reasons. He said so himself; the first to toast Hannibal for the invite and the privilege. What's another after he's had so many already? Their shared drink from across the space clearly pleases Hannibal, whose face goes ember spark bright.

When the group walks away (*read as stumble away*) for the night, it is not as part of the stragglers. Many sit by the fire still, to drink and laugh with each other, more cozy the more that the numbers dwindle as people seek out their beds. Freddie is dexterously typing into her phone, notes and notes and notes, while Tobias vaguely talks of the importance of the crowned people at their table, only saying they've come to an end of their skillful years, possibly by illness or injury.

(Y *ou don't doubt it - Jokūbas avoids faces, peering into the dark behind them, smiling faintly at jokes from Katherine, but seems pained. Katherine, jovial as she is, coughs quietly into a fist, and acts like everything is well. "Being without pain is a blessing," she says, talking of needles, and precisely placed pressure. "Give me a good knock upside the neck before years of futile hope."*)

"I'm calling it now," Freddie declares before heading into the house, pink cheeked and chilly in the night air. "These guys are absolutely nuts. The brother's a recreational egomaniac, the sister is a Mother Superior type, and everyone else is dead serious about the whole thing. Bonus points for some kind of incestuous service kink."

Will winces at that - what a disgusting thing to assume.

Alana, for her part, seems annoyed at this as well. “It’s a family religious practice that’s been ongoing at least since the Norman Conquest based on solar cycles. They’re entitled to a little tradition and hyperbole. It’s a really unique opportunity to get to see it,” she frowns.

“Makes you wonder how many primitive traditions survived since the Norman Conquest,” Freddie rejoins, thin face proud and snide. “Fancy seeing a deflowering? Maybe some auguries through drug use?”

“I could go for a deflowering *with* drug use,” says Brian.

Beverly smiles. “God knows you’ll die a virgin if they don’t do drugs first.”

They all laugh. It’s funny. Even Will thinks it’s funny, with his buzzing head, and curious looks at Katherine and Jokūbas, because he can’t quite make out why they are important, when all he sees is frail people diminished by the vigor of the people surrounding them. God knows Will is screwed if he had to be the life of the party at work every day - how can they expect that of anyone?

Freddie, however, is first to stop laughing, maybe never honestly laughing at all. She slinks off with Alana and Beverly to the girls’ room, led by Jurgita who is just as dark-eyed and smiling as she is in the sun, with her eyes made instead into windows overlooking midnight - colorless, without reflection.

It’s been a long time since Will has had to share space with another person. He always avoided student housing - he and Beverly are always together from high school on in a sort of resentful educated child accord, insisting that they don’t need other people, or extra money, or care packages from home. They exist in separate spaces, because while they are familiar with each other, they aren’t intimate in anything other than some shared interests, classes, and a poor man’s upbringing that bags scholarships but leaves them embarrassed by wearing the same tennis shoes one year after another.

(*You remember the first time she brings home a pair of fancy ladies' pumps - they had been glossy black and red soled, but thrifted. Too expensive for what they are, but no one knows that it's not Beverly who wears out their newness. "If that's what's important to you," you say with a shrug, and she doesn't talk to you for three days. She gets the summer internship, and you don't - it's not the shoes that do it, though the confidence they bestow helps.*)

The bunk rooms of the Lecter house deserve a kinder name than that. Certainly there's a twin bed on either side of it, with a narrow country window cutting the room with honeycombed panes of leaded yellow glass and a bench at the foot of the mattresses, but the space is wholesome and loved. His and Matthew's duffel bags look misplaced and foreign next to old carved frames and nice linen coverlets that have been given a touch of cross-stitch to color the wide expanse of white.

He frowns at that - sharing a room with Matthew. They can hear Brian and Tobias shuffling around next door. Will wonders which of the girls gets to sleep alone, or if they have to share with a stranger.

"Bathrooms down the hall," explains Abigail with a pointing hand down the dark length of it - she would disappear into it with her curtain of brackish-brown hair were it not for the old-time oil lamp in her hands. "Kitchen down the stairs to the left of it if you need water or something in the night. Chiyoh keeps the fire stoked at night, so you should be able to see around it, but there's a couple flashlights under the beds if you need a little help."

"Not a big fan of electricity out here?" snorts Matthew, already shedding his button-up to reveal a white tank top and the narrow lines of his torso - he always brings to mind snakes, coiled and inert, but tasting always for something fortuitous.

"Do you know many rural castles that are?" she replies, deadpan, picking at the tied edges of her scarf she's put on for the chill of the night. Will has to hide a smile while he zips his bag open to grab his own clothes for the night. "Lamp on the bedside is electric, just so you know. Sun comes up around 4:00 am, so I hope you get some shuteye while you can. There's blackout curtains for the window, but everyone will be up and going with the sun, so I hope you also brought earplugs. The floors creak."

"The nine days of all-nighters, then," says Will. "No sweat," he continues, shaking off the exhaustion that follows the gentle rolling of the room from a few too many drinks, and the vision of Matthew, considering the room. "Just like submitting a draft."

“Just eight days to go,” Matthew sighs and stares into the wooden beams of the ceiling, before pulling out a laptop to begin working. Observations, he mutters when Will asks, before he forgets with alcohol and sleep. He never drinks as much as everyone else, so there’s a good chance something will actually come out of that.

(*Matthew Brown, always middle of the road in academics, social situations, guest lists. Constantly watching and taking in the misbehaviors of others like a person jotting down notes of how people behave. You suspect he’s a sociopath that hasn’t really shown their hand or found a turning point that unleashes it, said as much to Alana and Beverly, and they tell you that you’re hardly an example of healthy human interaction yourself. Point, you concede.*)

“Think you’ll hold it together, will all the holiday stuff?” Matthew asks casually. “Haven’t seen you go a week without wincing at something.”

Will, despite himself and to his ire, winces. He’s always thought Matthew likes to wait for a vulnerability to touch and prod, and see what shape a person curls into when you press hard on it. Awkward social questions, like if you’d stop someone from being killed if it meant you’d be instead, or if people gather in groups for any reasons other than selfish one. It shouldn’t surprise Will that the new vulnerable spot in himself is the possibility of people who want to spend time with him, and that would put eyes on him the same way the rustle of high grass does to a hungry animal.

(*“Do you think you like corpses better than living victims because they’re more honest?” he famously asks you after explaining how you’re frustrated with learning to do interviews for investigations. You tell him you understand the truth anyway. It’s just exhausting to live in that person’s head for the space of an hour when blood spatter patterns and defensive wounds are less oppressive. You don’t want to think about their life trajectory after assault, rape, attempted murder, embezzlement, twisting reality to make it more palatable for themselves. It’s rarely good. The quiet truth of the morgue is better.*)

“Yeah,” says Will, staring into the ceiling as well until sleep takes him because there’s nothing left to do other than sleep off the mead and the vodka and prepare himself to put on a cheery face for eight more days of this. “I’m pretty sure I can hold it together. Thanks for thinking of me,” he frowns, and wishes he were somewhere else.

He rolls to face the wall. He doesn't trust Matthew, but the animal instinct to hide his neck and his back is overcome by the idea of staring sightless out towards him in sleep, and what thoughts Matthew might think to take notes of in Will's face.

It's raining, but it's not raining.

Will supposes it doesn't really matter. He's wet anyway, the way you know you are something when you're asleep. Rolling thunder is in his young ears, eyes up to look at the dark evening clouds and the street light. It's humid - maybe he's just sweating. It's not like that sticky discomfort isn't a vivid memory from most of his childhood.

He's outside the old Crescent house, a sad looking Sears kit house on the edge of Sandusky's downtown. Daddy showed him once in an old magazine clipping, "to the folks who like a touch of individuality" written atop the ad copy, back when you could buy a house the way you can buy a container of Lincoln Logs. It's a rented decrepit thing, just three lots down from a liquor store and a laundromat. It's the second of these things and not the first that drives Beau to spend the extra fifty dollars a month so that it's close by, because there's no washer and dryer, and Will needs to be able to do this for them after school. Daddy's rarely home early enough to work on it himself.

(*"Ain't got time," Beau sighs, wringing hands with a dish towel that comes away browned by the oil that sticks under the nails, no matter how many times he uses the soap at the shop. "Hate t'put it on you, but ah'll give you allowance fo' it." He always stares down when he feels inadequacy creep up. You think it's why he hugged the way he did - just so he could look downwards, head unobstructed by the flesh of a shoulder. You learn to do this too as you age. Maybe it's instinctual, a bred trait.*)

The asphalt outside the front yard, where Daddy parks, is cracked and broken up from years of neglect. Will likes it - it fills with water during the June rain that comes off the lakes, warm and torrential, a second Lake Erie that's just for him, gone rainbow-greasy and brown from the dirt at the heart of it. Thunderstorms are a treat. Free entertainment. Eight-year olds don't think much about sitting in puddles other than it's novel, and that he'll have to take a bath anyway.

Beau is sitting next to him, smoking on the curb of the street, feet deep in the water where it's overtaken the tops of his work boots and wicks up into his blue jumpsuit. Will is curiously relieved and ashamed to note the clean cut of hair on the back of Daddy's neck this time. A place for everything, and everything in its place. There's a sense of wrongness looking at it, but everything about the back of necks feels wrong these days. The teacher talks about the brain stem in science class, that it controls breathing, heart rate, nerve signals. Seems like bad design that it's outside of the skull.

"Do you think it'll rain tomorrow?" asks Will. He doesn't really want to know, but he honestly doesn't know how to start a lot of conversations when the silence is comfortable. It seems important to say something.

"'Bout a third of th' month," says Daddy.

"Will you be home if there's another thunderstorm?"

"Prol'ly not. Y'know how summer is."

"Yeah," Will sighs, and goes from sitting cross-legged to laying flat in the water, ears just shy of filling with tepid rainwater. He gets the same feeling of rising swell, the way putting a shell to your ear sounds.

Beau takes another drag, flicks the cigarette into the patchy grass in front of the house, and lies down too. Will turns his head to look, and also to fill his ear. The crawling, liquid surge of the water is disturbing, and he feels his breathing grow quick and shallow to match. The water keeps seeping up the blue of Daddy's jumpsuit, darkening it as it goes until it's all the same, damp curls similar to Will's own coiling in on themselves or falling flat under their own weight.

Beau never turns to look, but Will takes a kind of comfort in him being there, unbothered by the distant flashes of lightning, listening to cars splash by, and thunder roll somewhere over Lake Erie.

Matthew is still in his when Will wakes like he's coming up from a head full of cotton, dry mouthed and sighing around blurred and burning eyes. His throat hurts. So does his chest. The bonfire, Will reasons. The smoke gets in the eyes and down into people, even if no one means anything bad by it. Fire is transformative, but it is also dry, dry, dry next to the water and drinks and humid night.

A glass of water, comes the second thought.

His ear feels full and uneven, comes the third.

Will doesn't feel entirely comfortable going in bare feet into the long hall of the manor's upstairs, but Abigail said the floors creak, and he has a better feel for where to step with his toes than with his shoes. He'd hate to wake anyone with his night terrors.

(*Night terrors isn't quite right, though, is it? At least not the way you've come to recognize them. Everyone's heads were intact. There was no Christmas tree. Daddy uses his words, and you can name the memory, and no phantom animals are writing themselves into the shadows. Your joints ache, as does your neck, but you always hurt from standing or sitting or staying up late, don't you? Can't be suspicious about things like that - can't forget entropy constantly gnawing at your edges.*)

He grabs the flashlight from underneath his bed, pulls on an old grey sweater, and goes as softly out the door of the room as he can. It won't matter if he's quick and no one can see his state of undress. When he steps out, Will's relieved to see that Abigail is right - the stairwell at the far end of the hall is dim but warm with orange light from the kitchen beneath. Each stair feels warmer and warmer on the bottom of his feet as he pulls around the bend in them, carved bannister a series of hidden branches and creatures between whorls in the wood.

The kitchen hearth is actually quite well lit, not just a few scattered coals for the late night warmth, but a proper fresh fire with new logs on it. When he pulls up to the space between it and the kitchen's central butcher block and island, he sees this is because the kitchen is in use. A kettle is steaming on a hook over the edge of the flames.

“Strong starts to holidays often have strong drinks and strong headaches,” comes the soft but wry comment from the nook. Will whips his head around. Mischa sits in a velvet chair behind the ledger desk, casual and as golden eyed as her brother in the glow of the hearth.

She smiles, tucking a wrap tighter around her shoulders. “I find a little valerian tea and a few glasses of water take care of the worst of it.”

Will lets a breath out. “God, sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

He scratches his head, measures out five seconds, waits for the blood to pump slower in his temples. “I’m sure it’s hard to find a moment for yourself around here when everyone is staying in your house. Was just looking for a glass of water myself,” he explains, feeling exposed and halfway convinced to trot back up the stairs.

“Sour stomach or sour sleep?” She smiles wider, scrunched nose gone cat-pink and pretty as it seems to often do. Will can’t help but wonder what kind of man or woman could be her match. Is she actually kind? Is she simply spectating and has the cunning to keep the players at ease from her high seat above them?

“A little of both I guess,” he says, shaking his head. (*You can still feel water in your ear. You can’t shake your head like there’s water in your ear, because how do you begin to explain that to a perfect stranger?*)

She nods and stands, considering him with her narrow eyes and pulling at the long shawl over her shoulders, wide pants brushing the floor. She’s a mess by Hannibal’s tailored standards, but looks comfortable in her mess, hair falling in segments from a fishtail braid. It’s her house. Why wouldn’t she be welcome in her disarray? By contrast in his hooded sweater and athletic shorts, Will feels compelled to go back upstairs and properly cover himself.

She pulls two wide clay mugs from a cabinet, and taps a foot by the hearth. “As I’m sure you’d suspect, Hannibal told me a bit about you before this week,” Mischa begins thoughtfully, mouth pursed. “He’s not one to invite people without substantial consideration about it - he projects a very particular image to people who don’t know about our beliefs.”

“Professional callings aren’t particularly kind to loyalty to the past.”

Mischa nods. “That’s the truth. Imagine my surprise when he leaves for a week and comes back to tell me he’s met a smart, sharp-eyed boy that needs somewhere to be this summer.”

“Is it that surprising? Seems like you’re very much in the habit of taking in loners,” Will replies.

Her face doesn’t do anything that suggests she’s upset, but the longer he lets the words hang between them, the more he thinks it’s unkind. Will looks to the side, and sighs. “Sorry,” he tacks on, hand pushing through his hair. “That was kind of rude of me.”

Mischa’s placid look remains unchanged, and she grabs a hand towel, pulling the kettle on its hook towards her with a rod like something straight out of a Regency novel. The house is old - it stands to reason there’s lots of old things in it as well.

“At times, and with great consideration,” she explains. “Not everyone fits into this kind of lifestyle, or understands it. Hannibal is a good judge of character in that regard. But,” she continues, “not you. You are an eleventh hour change.”

Will huffs and crosses his arms, trying to straighten out a bitter smirk of his own. “A bad judgement of my ability to fit in, or a bad judgement on my ability to understand? I’m ok with being an impulse purchase before the register - it’s better than tactfully chosen orphan.”

She shakes her head. “We’d hardly pick you for the guest list for that. The significance of who attends the nine day feast is important - lots of moving parts on how things play out, if you will,” she explains with a sort of willowy whimsy, looking up to the ceiling with a considering look. “But I understand. Nobody likes to be a pity project. We certainly didn’t, and it’s only through wealth and connections from neighbors and outside the country that we were able to avoid it, and become what we are today.”

“I…” he starts. “Yeah. Yeah, Hannibal told me about that.”

(*And there you have it, Will. The reminder you need that you're not the only person surviving disaster day to day. You don't have some sort of monopoly on tragedy. You don't get the final say on family trauma, even if yours is fresh. Consider how awkward you feel. Consider how awkward everyone else feels about it in turn when it's about you.*)

" *That* ," she says, eyes rolling as she pours water over loose-leaf tea strainers in the cups, "is a thousand of a thousand years past for us. Unfortunate, yes," she concedes, "but inevitable. The death of our parents has given us purpose, which is more than most people get."

Will chews his lip.

Mischa taps at the tea strainers, and hands a drink to Will. They both take a long sip. It tastes in parts of licorice and bitter leaves. The water is still too hot, but that's better than the dryness in his mouth where the conversation from the dream sits ready to repeat.

"I don't think there's always purpose. For me, anyway," he says. "I feel stripped of it."

(You were set free. That obstacle you disdained, that duty to return to spaces you felt you had outgrown is removed. The problem is now you can't get away from it. You go from productive, smart, clever Will Graham that's got an entire career charted out for you, to a husk that can't rise off the floor because Beau Graham is still there, and he's not left, and maybe he never will. You go a week without seeing him, and then you do, and everything falls apart again and the empty space is restored - the warm-blooded and winter-air memory of your generational shackle.)

That feels unfair to Beau, somehow. Daddy didn't give Will purpose, but Will's come to expect that the opposite wasn't true.

"You have been left untethered."

Honesty rushes out, as it often does. "I gave him the bare minimum. Told him not to think too hard about it, and then I didn't fill the gaps so he wouldn't. Apparently that's as good a reason as any to blow your head off if you're suicidal and you don't have anyone else to push the thought back down." He feels his fingers wrap around his mug, pressed until they hurt.

Nicely made, the claywork here, he thinks a little hysterically. “I don’t know who’s the more selfish one. The guy who’s dead or the guy that’s still mad about it months later.”

"The son who's still mad about it," she corrects. "It's not so distant as all that."

They sit on that for a moment, drinking tea idly, listening to the logs pop. It’s a different kind of fire from the one that burns his nostrils. It would be at home outside, breath misting in open air and open sky. They used to camp a lot, him and Daddy, growing up. The kind of vacation that doesn’t cost much, works for shop buddies and their sons. They could go shooting together. Their nighttime fires are wild, and not at home in a house.

Mischa and Hannibal have been robbed of this kind of memory. For them, the kitchen fire is the kitchen fire, and the memory of sitting in the late night gloom and chatting about life with blue-collar fathers and sons is as distant as stars, and uncelebrated by their rites.

“I didn’t know my parents as adults,” says Mischa, like she’s heard him, more contemplative than sad. Her hands are working at a dish towel as the kettle sits over the coals, heating slowly again with new sink water. “For most purposes, Hannibal didn’t either, and this is where I think our grief is a shallow pool next to the lake of yours. People leave marks the longer you know them - you’ve known your father for the entirety of your life. There’s unfilled spaces he’s left in your heart. My brother felt the edges of the space you haven’t yet covered up.”

“A big fan of emotionally compromised youths, your brother.”

She grins, face scrunching again. “Your distress is attractive.”

Will’s stomach rolls at that. If it’s in fear or the slight thrill of being seen as attractive, he’s not really willing to admit either. “Well *that’s* certainly the least flattering comment I’ve heard about him.”

Mischa waves a hand the way one swats at a gnat, amused. “A connoisseur of violent delights, to carry that unflattering comment further, though I think of it less as a human failing and more as an animal’s cunning. Many of nature’s hunters are night creatures, and

listen for both family and prey in shouts and howls in the absence of light until they find each other. Which you are is a question of your own nature."

"Family or prey," Will states, staring into his cup. There's a small cluster of sediment in the corner of it. That's easier to look at than the sharp face to his side, eyes glittering in the kitchen hearth's light, reflective.

He senses the grin more than sees it - her teeth are as sharp as her brother's. "If you come back to a den and you're not sure which you are, I would say you're foolish, but Hannibal has a way of speaking riddles. I'm sure it will be clear before the end of the week."

They sit for a few beats longer - the tea still burns his mouth. He knew it would - he hisses around it to cool it down. When the sear fades, Will turns again to Mischa.

"Do you think much about your parents, if they would have wanted you to be here and replace them as a...sacral keeper, I think is what you said?" he asks.

Mischa nods. "I don't think much about what they would think, to be honest. Maybe when I was younger, and I perceived them as an irreplaceable loss," she explains. "Others stepped in, and mended that. I can live confidently knowing they would be proud that we honor what they were killed for. The tragedy has passed. It needed to happen to make us into the people we are today."

"Vengeance is a life well lived, I think is the adage," Will shrugs. He doesn't think he's supposed to think of his life in those terms, like there's something to avenge.

"Let bygones be bygones," she laughs quietly, and hums into her cup, steam curling in the light and between her eyes.

Will takes another sip - if it burns this time, his mouth is numb to it. "Is it really possible to let something like that go?"

“We did invite some of those men that took our parents from us to sit at our table, years later without the rifles,” Mischa continues with a wry look. “If they had found their way back to us after all that, perhaps they deserved to be there. Laima wills things to happen in strange ways. They died not long after, long enough to see what we grew to become, not long enough to tell you if it’s possible to let it go. The particulars sorted themselves out - justice served.”

“Fate by inalterable chaos, as opposed to inalterable design,” Will clarifies. “The result is the same.”

“Things shape themselves, like water into a cup,” she says, and drinks her tea until it’s gone, sediment and all. “Though sometimes we might shape the cup a little so the water is to our liking.”

Will nods, and tries to warm the feeling back into his feet in front of the hearth. Blood curls through his toes, the bottoms of his feet, around the stocky stone of his bones. Mischa’s next to his are uncovered as well and pointed forward, dancing and wicked smart even when she sits.

The valerian helps. The water does too. Mischa sits with him at the wooden stools at the edge of the kitchen, sipping quietly and talking of her years in Paris with her brother, returning home, and finding an unexpected enjoyment of farming the once decaying house between bouts of trying to reclaim the property and restore it to what little she could remember of it.

(*“Of course it never gets back to what you remember exactly,” she sighs. “The smell is different. The plants bloom in different orders. The blood never quite comes off the front step,” and this she says so off-handedly that you have to swallow around your own memory, vivid and red-lit.*)

His head falls to meet his pillow, and the blankets rush up to cradle him. He doesn’t really remember the walk back up the stairs, or even finishing his drink, only the steady *clop-clop-clop* on the way down the hall, fingers tied up in knots between the hair on his head, pushing it out of the way.

weave a circle round him thrice

It's easy to forget the discomfort of the night before in the warm morning sun that opens up in the amber-tinted honeycomb of the window. The room has a much kinder look with the rounds of yellow light cast down into it, long spreads of white linen now covered in it and made soft. Will blinks around blurred eyes, feeling the peculiar dampened quiet of a snow day rather than the warmth of the longest day of the year.

The rest of his night, short as it was, is dreamless and without interruption. Whatever was in the tea did its job without any problems, or mostly anyway. He breathes easy. There's a headache building between his eyes and his hairline that he wishes he could crack like an eggshell and just let the pain slide out from the break, but… It's not so bad that he feels justified in staying in place. He can't call out sick - he's not at work, he's not between classes, and what a waste it would be to fly this far and still hide in the safety of the guest room. He breathes for a measure, holding it in to listen to heartbeats, and to the occasional distant opening of doors, and shoes on the stone floors in the hall and kitchen downstairs.

Nothing from Matthew's bed, which a quick roll to the side proves to be empty and made up already, conspicuously tidy. He must have gone to great efforts to not wake Will, which unto itself is unusual. He listens for a beat longer, head turned to the wall - nothing from the room shared with the other guys. So Will must be the last one up.

Will grabs his phone from the end of the bed, set to silent and airplane mode to conserve the battery as long as possible, and sees 10:13 am winking at him from white letters on the black screen.

"Shit," he sighs, and throws the covers back to scramble into a clean black shirt and blue jeans. (*The dress code for barely trying - you're not ready for flax and bright threaded tunics.*) Will has no idea where people will even be at this point, but he suspects the kitchen is as good a place to start as anywhere else. He laces up his work boots, criss cross after tightened criss cross, and walks down the hall and the stairs, planks of wood and runner carpet of green protesting with each step.

The kitchen isn't empty, much as it wasn't last night, but there is no sharp-mouthed Mischa in it.

Instead, a slender woman is bent over her work, and gives him a slow blink when he rounds the corner. He's reminded of a cat, dozing in the warmth of a hearth. She doesn't smile, or jump up to introduce herself. She tightens her grip on what's in her hands instead, making an assessment, looking from entryway, to pantry entrance, to the hallway beyond.

She eventually turns her head again to look up at him.

"You must be Will," she says, voice gently accented. Will marvels at the mottled feathers between her fingers, casual there where her tone isn't. (*More at ease with an animal in hand than a person at hand. You can understand that* .)

"Forgive me for not shaking your hand, but…" and she gestures with a shrug, small bits of down falling to the countertop. "I am Chiyoh," she explains with another long blink. "One of the gamekeepers."

The mysterious Chiyoh, mentioned only by Abigail in passing up to this point, Will surmises with a nod. She sits in the same stool Mischa had occupied only the night before, but couldn't be more different with her dark hair and closed face, industriously plucking a pheasant of her feathers. The copper fluff of the down matches her gloves, a shock of color next to black breezy blouse and shooting trousers tucked into tall boots. She looks less ready for a summer festival, and more a ride through an English castle's grounds. This is perhaps why Will initially hesitates to go further than the door, shy of her serious face and busy hands.

"Your thoughts are loud," she says, not looking up from where she's returned to tearing feathers from under the wings. "Share a few and maybe I can help you."

Will looks from side to side - yes, just him. (*Maybe they don't just collect sad children here - another potential predator in colors meant to warn prey, just as Hannibal's are. My, what big ears she has.*)

"Ah, just trying to catch up with everyone, or find Hannibal," he says a little quietly, and shuffles on his feet. The still-new rubber of the soles squeaks on the flat stone. "Didn't really

mean to miss breakfast and whatever the morning festivities are."

She doesn't really react to this other than to nod, and Will continues talking, looking for something to work with. "Does one pheasant feed ninety people, or do you have a dozen more of those to work through?" Will asks, knowing full well it's a stupid question.

She looks down at the bird in her hands consideringly. "No, but it makes a very nice lunch for a few friends. Most people take care of themselves between morning and the next feasting night - we have quite the stock room. It's simply my preference to kill and cook my own entree when I can."

"Suspicious of leftovers?" asks Will, thinking of the meat gathered from cross to cross, and the packages of it left behind.

"Something like that," she says and stands, wiping her hands on the sides of her shirt. There's the smallest of smiles on her face, just the suggestion of amusement.

She looks him over, and he in turn looks more himself. Perfectly black hair, coiffed to the side, rigid posture, brows that don't lift or lower for any thought going through her head. It's enviable, really - the kind of mask he's always wanted to learn to wear. She must think him so transparent, still rumpled from sleep and the devil-may-care packing of his clothes.

She does eventually show him some mercy. "They've all gone out into the grounds, to look at the edge of the grove and choose where to expand," she says, looking back down at her bird, tearing faster now. "Digging pits for new sapling trees is hard work on a hot day."

"Got to start early," Will finishes, and gives a little half smile. "I guess just head out the back and past the big oak?"

"Hannibal will likely be in the grove to the north...perhaps with Katherine," says Chiyoh. She considers that for a moment, turning a long pin feather in her fingers. "Mischa will be further afield with your friends, down to the southeast where they'll do their planting this year. I would find her first."

Will twists his smile a little more, and tries to not look frustrated, but he does nod. Data received, he thinks. He'd almost rather avoid them all, especially Mischa who he feels a little raw at the idea of. She's been kind in the darker hours, and that makes him shy of her company and her teasing, and her perception from one parentless child to another. He hates the idea of her speaking of it in earshot of the others.

Should he find Hannibal? Or should he fall in with the other Americans and hide together in their obvious outsider otherness? (*Your t-shirts, your travel wrinkles, your cell phones, your bad jokes in the face of discomfort and blind-to-foreign-tradition eyes. You all try to hide it, but you are all a product of a type of culture too, and some are better than others at abandoning it.*) Maybe he should just grab a pheasant wing and make himself useful, and wait to see who misses him.

The thought that it might be no one shakes him bad enough that he opts to go outside and wander. Chiyoh only has one pheasant to pluck, and the sun has twelve hours of day left to burn away still. She only nods when Will turns to leave with a quiet thank you.

(*Yes you could help. Yes, you could pull out each feather one at a time, admiring the quills and the gentle cascade of one color into the next, but it reminds you of pulling teeth, and you're filled with unreasonable pain on the bird's behalf, wishing it was already over and done with. You rub goosebumps from your arms and go from the cool air of the manor to the glow of the sun - you are thankful you have no quills to pluck, but your mouth is full of aching bone.*)

When the first of the trees comes into view, so too does Freddie's red hair, disappearing as cardinals do between branches before coming down the straight path from grove to manor. Her little boots kick fine white gravel around in her haste, making little percussive bursts with each step. She doesn't really spend even a moment's thought on her trajectory, diligently typing away at her phone's keyboard, giving him a distracted smile before realizing it's him.

"Afraid to miss out on all the fun?" she asks, looking back down to her notetaking. "Knock yourself out, I guess. Not much out there to speak of, or at least not the good stuff."

“The groundskeeper said something about sapling trees, but I take it you’re not much interested in becoming an arborist. Maybe that is the good stuff to the Lecters,” Will says. “Sacred groves, and all that...can’t imagine they would call it bad.”

“No,” she says with a shrug, “but it’s not what I’m here to see. I *am* , however, interested in *where* they like to dig holes for them, so it wasn’t a total waste,” Freddie adds, wiping sweat from her brow with a thin arm. “I just need to figure out where they did it last time.”

Will frowns, but doesn’t really get an opportunity to probe that particular thought - Freddie slinks back into the house, ruby-bright between another pair of showy-white viburnum bushes at either side of the door, staring over to the pantry storeroom hall’s door sealed to it’s left before disappearing into the cool stone of the manor.

On her own agenda, which is fair - it’s not like Will was looking for her either. He takes a leaf out of her book though, and goes his own way: back out into the grove, to listen again to the boughs of the trees, and soak up the calm of a quiet glade. He’s not much of an arborist either, but there’s something about the stillness here that he can feel like a blanket settling over restless legs.

The space in front of the oak is as empty as the first time Will finds it, shaded and cool in its own cascade of leaves. They are unmoved today, with no breeze to rustle them, and no warbling of voices coming from nearby. So too are there no birds to be heard, only the occasional creak of the wide branches ahead, and the skittering of small creatures from well beyond the grass and the stone of the glade, still wet with morning dew.

Will finds himself disappointed - he had thought maybe the cuckoo would be out here again. It’s the kind of thing you forget, that animals are living things with an agenda of self-satisfaction and don’t think of their audiences. It has no need to be here for his benefit, anymore than a lion needs to sit at the front of an enclosure when instead it has the fullness of a savannah to pace. His appreciation and awe is secondary to its needs.

No matter - Will has never failed to entertain himself. He turns instead to the great white rock.

Will puts a hand to the stone's dampness. It is still night-cold with its bowl-shaped basin full of water, sitting undisturbed and dark like a hole into the earth. Cleaned recently, perhaps, with hands that tenderly avoid disturbing the moss that covers it, but the dirt surrounding it too soggy for anything other than having been rinsed.

(*Nana, your Momma's mom, had a hose she kept on the side of her house that she sprinkled the big gladiolas and cedars and little concrete figures with to keep them fresh and dark and clear of the kudzu doing its best to swallow the pillars of the porch front. Fake deer, fake birds, Saint Francis even though she's not Catholic, the occasional garden gnome or plastic pink flamingo appearing from underneath poorly trimmed virginia creeper vines. There's no real usefulness to it, just a habit. It rains all the damn time in the summer in Louisiana, and Daddy occasionally comes by to pull the vines off them because son-in-law's even if they are estranged are dutiful, or so he tells you, but still they must be rinsed and seen day to day lest they be forgotten or disappear. It's the routine that gives it meaning, not the action.*)

Will, feeling that same cotton-headed distant silence he has on waking, sighs a long breath of damp summer air out, and walks past the stone to the tree behind it with wet hands.

It's a grand old thing; blackened bark, massive, filled with holes large enough to stick his head in. He thought the exact same the day before, listening to the cuckoo hiding up high in it's branches, and Mischa brushing hands across it like something beloved. The trunk alone is several feet wide, hollowed and forked and generously carpeted in moss on the tops of its branches and boughs. It's the kind of tree he would have climbed in a heartbeat as a child, even if he knows he shouldn't now as an adult. It's a sacred thing, after all, old, familiar with men in chain and plate as much as industrially made mass-market clothing and sneakers. It's not made for climbing. There's memory in its rings hidden under its grizzled dark hide.

The sunlight trickling between the branches find the ground with difficulty, even now when the day's zenith can't be terribly far off. It casts a shadow as buildings do - it has a force of presence, as sitting in the shadow of the National Archives does, or looking upwards into the obelisk of the Washington Monument. It rises in strength, and thinks not at all of the small living things shuffling around its cornerstone roots.

Will feels that force dissipate, and dread replace it. It's the low ceiling of the living room. It's the gaping maw of the closet of his adolescence that he stares into until he falls asleep and wakes to in the dark. Steam floats past his ear, phantom and snaking.

(*Thus reads the line, from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders, because you read it instead of talking to anyone about it: panic attacks are an abrupt surge of intense fear or discomfort. You're a smart boy. You know what kind of crazy you are.*)

He swallows around a tight throat, and reminds himself where he is. He is not on the floor of the double-wide. He is not home for Christmas, where the paramedics are waiting outside with news that is bad-bad-bad because that's the kind they know how to give, but his heart is starting to gallop in his chest anyway like he is.

(*You know how this one goes, you've seen the reruns over and over: the air fogs more thickly behind your head where you've come to rest on the ground, and for a terrible moment, for a long second, you think the back of your neck and skull are gone too, just like Daddy's - you're small enough that the caliber of the Remington can do it. You won't take the extra 11 minutes to bleed out. You're eight years old and there's a thunderstorm over the Crescent house and -*)

"Will," he hears.

(*"Will you be home if there's another thunderstorm?" you ask between catching raindrops on your tongue that fizzle with lightning and Daddy shakes his head - "Prol'ly not. Y'know how summer is. Y'know-how-summer-is-y'know-y'know-y'know-*)

Will turns to the white air, and blinks softly into the snout of the stag, his knife-antlered deer, staring down the long velvet of its head, eyeguards aligned to Will's own wide blue ones. Red ringed, round pupil, forward facing, brackish and human and staring into his own. It smells of soil, and rented carpet cleaner shampoo, and the flake detergent Daddy has used on his laundry since before Will was born, and the heavy metal smell of meat draining. He cuts his gaze down to the ground, more fiber than soil.

"Will," he hears again, and blinks against his arms being violently shaken. He looks back up to where the deer is.

Hannibal, dressed in a blue collared shirt, rolled at the sleeves. No antlers, no steaming breath. He's dropped a spade in the mossy grass at their feet, the same kind that he had in the

car on the drive up. Chiyoh said they were digging for the grove today - maybe the doctor had some digging of his own to do when he was done with Katherine.

(*You're lucky he didn't hit you with it, comes the unbidden whisper. You're lucky he only considered it.*)

He shakes his head until the idea falls to the wayside. His head hurts so much, but not from the spade. Hannibal wouldn't hit him.

(*Did he consider it? You don't know why you would think that.*)

"I wanted to see the grove. I think I was looking for you," Will says, thinking that will explain his presence, so far away from Mischa and the others. He tries not to worry about having said that before. He thinks he might have said that before. He thinks something might be wrong with him, beyond the normal wrong. He thinks about where Chiyoh keeps her hunting rifle, something appropriate for turkeys, maybe doves, and the solid wall of bone and soft palate that sit just above and behind his tongue.

Will winces against the sunlight from between the branches. The headache stings.

"And so you have," comes the familiar reply. Hannibal eases his arms down with Will's, and brings his hands back up to rest on the side of Will's cheek and forehead. He pulls the hand at his cheek back and presses instead to his neck, pulling his wrist back to look at his watch.

He's taking his pulse, comes the first thought. That's good, comes the second thought. Somebody should check up on things like that.

"I don't feel very well," Will sighs.

(*Who's the last person you told that to? A school nurse? Maybe the detective that comes from the local Mobile precinct to make sure you didn't actually kill your dad the way that Alana suspected you had the capacity to? You didn't even say it crying over the kitchen sink*

back in May - it's the kind of admission that gets you a 'poor baby' and invitations for a ride home, when you really wish someone would just hold you for a moment until you feel ok again.)

"Then a doctor is a very wise person to find," Hannibal replies, and pets sweat-dampened curls away from his face. Will knows it's a strange comfort, not appropriate for two people who barely know each other, but it feels so nice that he just closes his eyes, and lets the dark spaces of the oak's clearing and the bangs on his forehead rest his eyes, waiting to be pulled into a new space.

The feeling passes, as it always does. It seems like a million years to go from anxious to peaceful, measuring air through his nose like he's a bellows for the fire of his body. Too much force and he snuffs it out. Too little, and the coals will only smoke. It's good to have some stand there with him and breathe in time with him, like his body has forgotten something essential and now must be retrained. The drips of dew from the trees and rustling in the high canopy overtake his heart in his ears. There are voices far away, laughing.

"Right as rain," Hannibal says when he takes his pulse again.

Will picks up Hannibal's spade, because he needs something for his hands to do, and Hannibal nods, wiping dirt from his own. He's been leaving an offering for the large wayside cross in the neighboring clearing, he explains as one does to a frightened child - it requires a much deeper hole, and Hannibal didn't notice Will getting near the oak. Will doesn't think he's frightened, but Will also thinks he's not got the best grasp on reality these days, and maybe it takes the same kind of approach. Do not startle - experienced handlers only.

They head towards the edge of the grove, because everyone else is there, and that's where he should be too. He likes that Hannibal never tries to make small talk Will needs to engage in, or treats him like a child. Hannibal instead fills their walk through the trees with a lecture of sorts on the stone, dwindling in the shade of the trees behind them.

(*"An erratic," says Hannibal, and you laugh because no wonder you want to stand next to it and lay yourself close to its granite plains like it's important. You have kinship. "Pulled from the north to the south by glaciation, a gift from Finland after thousands and thousands of*

years. Very uncommon in our swampy neck of the woods. You understand why we'd be fascinated with it for centuries, yes? ")

Hannibal passes him to Beverly with a promise to come find them for lunch in an hour's time, and Beverly simply asks how much Will had to drink the night before. She's annoyed, he thinks. It's the same kind she gets when asked to come home for Easter, or she's interrupted while reading. Will's never considered what it's like to be on the receiving end of that, only watched.

"More than I should have," he says, like that covers the mead, the memory, the conversation with the orphan girl-matron in the kitchen, the great heaving lungs of the stag under the tree and that someone should probably send him home before he can embarrass himself more than he already embarrasses everyone else.

Mischa just strides over and greets him like it's nothing worth commenting on, that Hannibal digs more than enough holes to make up for a single person taking a seat, and besides, they've already lost one person today. "This is more akin to chores than a festive thing," she explains, sleeves tied back, her fingers blackened from loamy soil. She's not as natural with the shovel, but she cuts the ground with it purposefully, marking out the wide edges of new holes without complaint. "I'd take a walk too if I had the chance and inclination."

Beverly frowns, but doesn't argue. If anyone else feels the same, they don't get much opportunity to express it in the midday humid heat.

Will would like to say that he has a stunning memory of night two's feast, but most of what he remembers are snapshots. Some are good, some are disquieting. Everyone's had that night or that vacation - the four star restaurant gets called up on someone's phone, everything tastes great, you know you're in the company of friends, but there's no memory of what you ate or what you drank. The building is a blur of mood lighting, and the plate's are white, and the food was what you needed, but there's nothing of the conversation, and there's nothing of faces that you can recall. Somebody says something offensive. Somebody takes offense.

(*"This should help," Mischa says to you in the hours before dinner, dispensing another remedy with the kind of confidence that you've never known how to combat, where you*

accept it because you haven't figured out how to say no. It smells strongly of chamomile and sour blossoms, but the headache recedes, and you thank her. Hannibal watches as you drink down the entirety of it, as school nurses do when dispensing aspirin and glasses of water, watchful for deceit. You go soft with the drowsiness of a person in need of a nap, and are surprised when Beverly comes to wake you from beneath a tree in the courtyard later in the afternoon, making fun of your burnt red skin. "Hannibal left you here," she explains when you ask how you came to be there, black eyes of a birch tree winking over your head. "Seemed to think it would be better than sending you back inside.")

The tables are laid out in similar splendor to the first day, white linens sitting still in the breezeless summer evening, and trays of food are passed with the sort of casual familiarity of neighbors sharing bounties. A cured ham there, a crock of homemade soft cheese to spread over dark grain bread there, jams and sauces spread into little white saucers that pepper the table between glasses of vodka and sour ale served in brown corked bottles.

Unlike the first night, Hannibal and Mischa don't bother with English tidings. Their prayers are between each other in curling words that sound water flowing smooth, like sitting next to a river or a jetty. With his still sore head, Will's thankful for this - it's the kind of white noise he grew up on. Their toasts are to older things not meant for foreigners. They are, all the same, much briefer. Second nights in a series of nine don't hold a lot of significance, made all the more obvious by a blazing fire and straight lines of dining tables from the moment Will steps out to the courtyard at the front of the house.

The feasting starts with the siblings throwing another cloth-wrapped package on the flame. They pour glasses of ale behind it. Literally feeding the fire first - Will watches the flames dance, uncaring of the gift, but nonetheless nobody eats before it.

Alana wears her white and blue dress again. In the space to her right, a pretty woman with brassy hair and a saffron-colored gown with threads of red at the seams makes herself cozy. She's a truly beautiful woman, cow-eyes green and watery that reads less fragile and more Hedy Lamarr. Her wit hides under careful kohl-black lashes. "Margot," she introduces herself with a stately, unmoving stare, lips quirking at Alana's facetious curtsy. "Hannibal thought you could use some extra company."

"Hannibal's a wonderful host if you're the kind of company he sends," Alana laughs, and smiles the honest, slow one that Will remembers from back when she looked at him that way too.

Will shakes his head. He swallows another glass of spirits, and tries to fade out and let them talk without the spectre of himself over them.

He's interested to note that whatever it is of that wit Will sees in her, Alana sees it too, and turns it in the firelight like a prism to look through. She asks about Margot about her life before coming here, and turns to look at her in full. (*"Bored heiress with a laundry list of issues and rules tied to trusts and bad family politics," she says with a sly smile. "Figured I'd try my hand at an equivalent to living on a ranch and starting a candle business. Lifestyle goals, or whatever the kids talk about these days."*) She smiles wider between sipping glasses of sweet elderflower juice and little glasses of vodka that Margot ignores.

So too does Brian pay her special attention, though less the smiling kind. In fact, upon sighting her, he goes out of his way to integrate himself into hers and Alana's conversation.

"You're Margot Verger," he says pointedly. Margot's face, Will notes, doesn't fall, but hardens as sugar does. Tempered. "I saw you a few years back at a donor program party for the Trachtenberg School - something about your brother and the foster kid program. Heard a rumour that you might have come out here, but I didn't expect it to be more than a rumour, or to see that you'd *stayed* ," Brian says, leaning against the table.

Margot rolls a shoulder. It is small boned, pale. It is a weapon of disregard. "Sometimes rumours have a foundation in truth," says Margot. "Call it my rebellious phase if you'd like...wealthy white woman has spiritual experience and means to perpetuate it - wild concept, I know," she replies, bone dry and politely smiling.

"Didn't your brother go with you?" he asks. "Nobody's seen him the same way they haven't seen you, but here you are."

"Here I am," she says, light, unconcerned, smile still polite and fixed in place like it's painted. Conversation ended. Brian can only politely smile in turn, as talk segues into language barriers, fabric crafts, community income. Whatever Brian's digging for, he'll have to dig later.

There's one thing that nobody has to really ask to confirm: it's hard to not notice the swell of Margot's belly, not heavily pregnant, but far enough along for it to be unmistakable. She doesn't volunteer any information. Alana doesn't have enough of her confidence as a friend

to ask - it's only been a couple hours after all. Brian doesn't quite dare, and Will's always shied away from things like this, even if he is curious about the cause instead of the condition.

(*You're chomping at the proverbial bit to know: what's her tragedy? You feel the certainty of one somewhere, the same way you know of one in Jurgita, and sense the edges of them in Katherine, and Abigail, and Jokūbas. You want to know how many other sordid youths are sheltering between cups of tea and poorly understood old words, avoiding their actual problems in the guise of religion. Who's the next of the Lecters' American misfit toys? Where do you fit into that narrative, and why does it make you simmer with anger at the thought of being reduced down to that paradigm?*)

Will casts the thought aside. Not his damage. Not the kind of damage he'd be willing to surrender his own to become better acquainted with. He recedes from the conversation, and allows himself to be alone in the crowd.

There's a mixture of voices, English, Lithuanian, and otherwise - Will doesn't quite have the ears for the difference, and treats it the same as background noise. The guys make inappropriate jokes while the ladies of the house cover their mouths like what a funny thing they've heard, but really laugh at the foolishness of it. The Lecter siblings make the rounds with polite faces, fixated tonight on their neighbors and their residents, and Will fills the gaps mentally - *how are your children, so good to hear that your sons are going to school in Edinburgh, we've expanded a bit with the apple orchard, yes, Hannibal is going to teach a few classes in the fall, we must get him out of the house and away from all these needy children of our Gods, or how else will we find more of them.*

(*Unkind of you, but something about that feels true. Fulfilling needs and providing attention is key in conditioning an animal. The Lecters love their herd, the way a farmer loves their cattle.*)

At some point, Will looks over and catches Hannibal staring at him, much like the night before even if he doesn't cast his eyes into every face the same way. Will raises his tiny spirits glass in an echo of it, though Hannibal unfortunately can't mirror this time, a couple of people in front of him requiring his ear. The man gives him a secret smile, and turns indulgent to an elderly woman gesturing with arms and expression enough for the both of them.

It’s unreasonable to expect him to drop everything to entertain Will. It doesn’t leave Will feeling any less out of sorts to know that.

Will never sees Katherine of the night before, only Jokūbas sitting very rigid and still, peering into the night behind the fire. (*“She wasn’t feeling up to the festivities,” he says, one of the only things Will has heard come out of his mouth in 24 hours. “Had something important taken from her.”*) Neither does he see Freddie, who opts to skip the daytime work in the grove, and pitchers of sweet stewed fruit juice, and Mischa tenderly looking over the lime green leaves of a linden sapling, and now apparently a night of dancing and folk music.

Not her thing, Will thinks. Not fun to make fun of the celebrants when they don’t choose to celebrate in words she knows how to twist into something sharp.

It’s hard to not feel alone this time, with everyone turned to someone else in conversation. He’s still a little muddy from the tea, and the nap, and the uncertainty that maybe he’s not supposed to be at this table, that he should be at home in his and Beverly’s apartment, maybe watching John Wayne movies and pouring one out for his father because he hasn’t hosted a funeral, or written an obituary, and this whole trip is just another step in avoiding the fact that he’s by himself now. Camaraderie dissolves at the edges of the classwork, and the mutual pursuit of higher learning, or the common character changing plots of losing parents. Beverly and the guys have each other and their thesis ideas. Alana has a new friend. Hannibal has his sister.

Will stares into the fire, and wants someone to talk to, but instead drinks, because the alternative is to look hopeful and wait. (*And when has that ever worked out?*) He understands a bit better how his father might have felt the way that he did - he wonders if his father sat quietly waiting for him to come home.

Will goes to Mischa for more of the valerian tea before bed. He thinks he can try to sleep off the sour attitude and the ales that are poured with ease through the evening between songs and cheering games between the feasting crowd, and heads inside before midnight. Maybe tomorrow will be different - that’s the attitude he’s been told to have, so may as well try, right?

She smiles when she sees him from her velvet chair, lounging in the attitude of one trying to catch their breath and get off their feet. The perpetual hostess, pouring water in a mug for him and slicing for him a very nice soft bread with butter to help it down without a second thought. Her hands are very tiny next to the long arm of the knife.

“Never go to bed on an empty stomach,” she winks in the dark of the kitchen entrance, passing a tiny plate to Will, sliver thin and decorated elaborately. Something from the times before this, when the Lecters were nobility, not crafters of land and men. “I think I will do the same.”

“Got a lot of alcohol to cut?” Will asks with a tired smile of his own, breaking off oily bites of the bread to eat with tearing fingers. Beneath the food hides woven serpents and roses, brown and blue against the bone china.

“No,” she says with a round mouth, “but I don’t go to bed on an empty stomach either way.” Fair. No reason to with a house like this, or a family like hers. They spend their days between growing and preparing their food, and what a shame it would be to pass it up.

When she hands him the tea this time, removed from strange dreams, the whole moment is a throwback to another time - warm cups of milk before bedtime, a heavy drink to hold nightmares down. (*You grow into a different kind of heavy drink to match his over the years, but there was a time it wasn’t a vice. It’s just milk, inexpensive, easy to mix with chocolate or maple syrup. Stick it in the microwave, and behold, a Sunday night salvaged for two people just coping.*)

“This wasn’t yours, was it?” Will asks suspiciously, feeling awkward with the mug still steaming in his hands.

“I expected you.” Mischa rubs his hair and shakes her head, like Hannibal did when he woke him from his hallucination in the grove. She sends him upstairs with long-fingered hands to his shoulders like she does it every night, that they sit at the hearth and speak secrets as companions do because Will isn’t a guest, he’s her favorite evening visitor.

How the Lecters do this so easily distresses him. Will’s had to fight his way into almost every close friendship like it would hurt him to be anything other than passing acquaintances. Hannibal and Mischa make their drinking companions so quickly that he can’t tell if it’s

artifice, or that he's just one of many in a long list, with many more waiting afterwards for their sparkling eyes and cutting eye teeth smiles.

The long planks of the house's second floor hallway feel different when he wanders back to bed. The tea with its gritty sediment sits between his teeth, but by the time Will makes it up the stairs, all thoughts of brushing it away fade with the need to lie down. He pulls back the sheets, slides cold naked feet to the bottom of the bed, and doesn't even think about what Matthew will think of him when he wanders up himself, and how Will should cover his neck in the presence of threats.

He wakes sometime in the middle of the darker hours. The honeycomb of the guest bedroom window brings the night in to wake Will with its mellow twilight, the same heavy-lidded drag from sleep to waking. It's a surprise to open his eyes again to the network of circles cast on the ground and the coverlet by the moon. It's almost startling to see that he's not alone when he does, Matthew quietly breathing into his pillow. His face looks tighter in sleep - he has to work harder to keep whatever's in him locked up for the night.

Will swallows around the dryness of his mouth, the sediment still crunching between his molars. He pushes it aside with his tongue like it's grains of sand, and thinks idly if he leaves it there long enough, maybe he'll make a pearl. A literal wise word, trapped in concentric hard layers.

He falls back asleep in the violet-blue of the boreal night.

(*You think you dreamed. You think you walk outside between the trees, feeling the debris of old leaves and aging spring flowers between your toes. The oak bends to welcome you in the moonlight, and the stag bends to press tines of horns into your back until you run up against the bark and your head comes to rest in one of the tree's hollows. It scratches at your forearms, and you wake under a cloud of blankets, unaccountably cold but slow-minded as a syrup. You don't wake really, but instead flow out of bed, Matthew asking if you ever made it back from the bathroom. "I don't remember that," you mumble, and rub the sand from your eyes.*)

Breakfast is more thick porridge like at the cafe in Vilnius, this time with pats of butter and brown sugar mixed in, cardamom and milk-rice between each tired tooth. Whatever the morning's ceremonies are, they haven't been called to participate in them, and the part of Will that typically wants nothing more than to take a hike by himself or stroll the banks of the Potomac alone is happy for it.

"Mom used to make something like it on Saturdays as a treat - took a whole gallon of milk and a giant stockpot to do it, and called over all the neighbor kids. It's my favorite," Abigail says, a rare shy statement from her as she balances on a stool in the kitchen, churning her spoon through her bowl to make furrows where butter and cream pool in them. From the other side of the center table, Alana and Tobias sit, trading comments on the day before, food largely ignored as collateral to their conversation.

"I think maybe mine too," he says in reply, smiling. She's so often at the edges of the room in a way that Will feels like he's back in high school himself. He wants to ask why she's here. He desperately wants to ask about the long scar at her neck. Knowing any food can become ash in the memory of a bad thing, he reigns himself in. Hunger is difficult next to a sour thought. "Not really a Lithuanian food though, right?"

"Naw, definitely something I brought from home," she mutters down into the glass bowl. "Rice porridge is a Norwegian thing. Or a Minnesota thing. I don't know, I guess it depends on who's grandmother you ask and how much cardamom you put in."

"Americans struggle with heritage," Alana says in reply, turning to them with a thoughtful frown. "I'm sure my mother's got a few old country recipes for spritz cookies and gluhwein that have never touched the hands of an actual German, but the idea of it is romantic."

Tobias, typically content to watch people converse and keep to himself, chooses instead to engage. "Americans lack complexity of heritage the way the English language lacks purity of structure," he says between handwritten notes that he amends on the table in blue and green ink. "A little of this, a little of that, and without much reverence for its actual origins."

"Beating up cultures in back alleys for the parts it likes?" asks Alana, smiling, but annoyed. Will's annoyed too. Tobias is consistently prickly and officious, the way that he assumed Hannibal would be when they met but hasn't been at every turn.

(*You are surprised by most things he does. You are surprised to think about it as much as you do.*)

“There’s nothing truly historic in the States,” says Tobias, taking a long draught of dark coffee, frowning at the grit on his lip after. They keep the grounds in it here, something that’s an adjustment that they didn’t notice in the tourist-laden areas of Vilnius, but Abigail assures them it’s the style here. “Where’s the cathedrals built over four or five generations? Where’s the evolution of language and belief? The wild spaces of America are great, but mankind has so little impact on them and religion is so sanitized in North America that even small communes like this one are more interesting and nuanced than swaths of people who fly the US flag.”

Abigail’s head tilts as a bird does, filling her gaze with curious wide blackness.

“Do you like them?” Abigail asks, pointed. “The Lecters’ nuances,” she clarifies when he turns dark eyes to her in turn, with a steady blue-eyed look of her own. “Since you’re the resident scholar on Baltic society here and all. I don’t think I’ve fully grown to appreciate them, and I’ve been living with them for a year. Kind of more of a Minnesota porridge kid, myself,” and gives a twitching wave to the table. “Don’t know how you got to hear about them to begin with.”

There’s a pause, where Tobias drinks more coffee, and Abigail eats more porridge, waiting in the safety of habit. An understanding passes between them, but it’s a careful one, that Will thinks might have teeth. Both Will and Alana look at each other with furrowed brows, eyes darting between the two.

(*I know something you don’t know, says Abigail’s face.*)

“Hearsay,” he says. “I’m looking forward to seeing how many of the ones I know about are actually true,” Tobias adds at length. “More than just the grove - the hunting too. It’s the kind of purity of origin I enjoy. Instinctual, even. It has a sense of purpose and place.”

(*I know something I shouldn’t know, says Tobias’ in turn.*)

Abigail puts another spoonful of brown sugar into her breakfast and shrugs. “If you think so,” she says, and Will wonders not for the first time what she’s doing here, and if anyone will actually tell him. “Hope you’re a good shot, since you’re so keen on hunting.”

She seems so adult, in her little leather flat-soled shoes and jeans, adherent to the dress code with her wide blouse, but resolutely her own creature. If Abigail’s been here a year, she may have not been the adult she seems like when she arrives and lays down her head for the first time in the stony silence of the house. Will guesses that’s not really his business, but much like the long length of scar tissue hiding behind an embroidered red scarf, much too warm for a late June day, he finds the question coming to his lips: who left you here? How did you get stuck at the end of this long drive?

Will thinks he might be missing things he really should ask about. Maybe later, he promises himself, and further promises himself to properly pay attention at tonight’s dinner, and what people ate and laughed about, and to talk to Hannibal who invited him and finds him easily in a crowd, but Will suspects wears different colors when no one is looking.

(*“Cryptic mimicry. Camouflage to make you look like something else.”*)

Hannibal, when the height of the day has passed, and Will thinks he’s seen all of what he thinks he can tolerate of people gathering crops and threshing the high grass of the field with curving sickles between songs, finds him sitting on the step between the south facing field and the house where the shade of a elderberry with its purpling fruits has shaded Will’s fair skin this time.

It’s not that Will tries to frown in the midday sun. It’s that Will is always frowning for one reason or another, a heavy expression that Beau was never entirely able to put away, and Will has learned through bad eyesight and bad examples to do the same. Resting bitch face, Beverly calls it, but honestly, what a crock of bullshit, reducing the glaring look of someone concerned, nearsighted, or thoughtful to something so meaningless.

So when Hannibal bends to tease him for it in the heat of the day, Will only frowns more.

"The elder-tree that grew," Hannibal lilts, book-serious and eyes shining in good humor, "beside the well-known charnel-house, had then a dismal look."

Against the tree trunk, Will doesn't think his eye roll quite translates beneath his hair, but he feels better having done it. "For a scholar of Baltic language and history, you seem to like your British poets," Will replies, squinting into the brightness of the day. "Wordsworth feels inappropriately English for the setting."

Hannibal nods, looking back up at the people working the garden. "A lover of beautiful forms, Mr. Wordsworth was. For a scholar of forensics and dead things, you seem to like them as well. I feel I don't speak of many of them that you don't in turn feel the need to name."

From beneath the low boughs of the fruiting tree, Will smiles. "Got any more exciting facts or works of fiction about my choice of seating today? Maybe a historical accounting of the work music out in the field? More iconic animals? Or do we proceed instead to the part where we ignore that I wandered around your property yesterday and probably narrowly avoided getting hit upside the head?" he asks.

He chews his lip at Hannibal's raised brows, taking that in. "Why's Abigail here?" Will adds, because it's the only thing missing from that laundry list of queries.

Hannibal gives him a little laugh, hardly noticeable were Will not looking for it. "You're all questions today. I see you woke up much more clear-headed than yesterday, so perhaps we can ignore the confusion in the woods as a one-time thing. Seems you simply needed a regular meal and some sleep. Walk with me," he says, gesturing to follow. "One of the larger lakes is to the west of the house, down past the grove. I think you'd like it, as I also think our young friend would like some privacy for her history, safe from less discerning ears."

Will thinks of Freddie, prowling as a fox does around chickens. Or digging, as it were. Fair enough. "Two for one," Will shrugs, pushing off from the ground. "Can't argue with that kind of practicality."

It's a relief to be out in the woods again, sounds from the house fading away. The branches, not so thick as they are in the oak's canopy, zebra stripe the white of Will's shirt with

shadows and glare off the tops of his glasses with afternoon sun, but at least he's not burning more. He's been told it's good practice to look for upsides.

A few more upsides, while he's at it: the gentle crunch of leaves and swish of grass underfoot. The smell of deep water, somewhere on the other side of the trees. The companionable quiet of Hannibal to his side, arms crossed at the back, made neutral and still. With his sleeves rolled to the elbow, Will can see the tail of a curling snake in the crook of his arm, every bit as stark and black as the runes between carded fingers.

"How many tattoos do you have?" asks Will, apropos of nothing save his thoughts, fixed on the coils. "Seems like it would be a problem for a practicing surgeon to have."

"True," says Hannibal. "A few here, and a few there...most of which aren't visible in professional clothing and a doctor's white coat." He turns with a sly thin smile. "Now follow that thought through - when do you think I had my hands done?"

"When you thought you could get away with it," Will replies easily. It feels right. "A curiosity or an interesting story, instead of a mark of bad character and judgement. Doctor Lecter is a good surgeon, ergo, Doctor Lecter has good, honest, *cultural* reasons to have them."

Hannibal hums a bit, mouth creasing wider with his perennial smile. "Astute. When I switched my career focus, it seemed as good a time as any," he explains. "One likes to have an air of mystery other than their wardrobe if they are to drive interest in their field of study. I've been told that kind of camouflage is suspicious," he teases.

Will bows his head, shy of the reminder.

"I don't think it was a determining factor for most of the GWU kids," Will says, turning his head back up as they walk to look towards the drop in the canopy floor that a creek is hiding in, veiled in ferns. "With exception of Alana, all I ever hear about is European revivalist movements and extremist cells."

He winces immediately, when he thinks about what he just said. Always stumbling into it, even when it's not his own crassness for people to get offended by. Hannibal, if he is offended, shows nothing but good humor about it, eyes looking down to Will's wince and up again, his attention a flickering ember.

"Now, now, Will," he starts, "don't start being coy with your phrasing when you and your friends have sold me on your sterling truthfulness. I knew even before you were coming along that a few of your compatriots are less enamoured in welcoming summer and seeing this way of life, and more invested in finding some sort of fundamentalist terrorism with a post-Soviet, nationalist flair. It's good that you recognize it in them - intent has a curious way of compromising research data."

"Have they had any luck?" asks Will with a snort, foot scuffing and catching on a rock. " I must have missed the Black Mass, or whatever the pre-Christian equivalent is on the way in."

"Went to the wrong part of the grove to see it," Hannibal slides in with another grin, the way he delivers all his jokes. "But as the saying goes, you can torture any data into saying what you want it to say."

(*Does he make jokes, or are you just making leaps of logic?*)

(*Don't be stupid, of course he makes jokes* .)

Will rolls a shoulder. "I don't really understand the skepticism, outside of the usual onlookers' perspective. I wasn't a regular at church before this, and I don't know if I would be after, but if you're happy with the handicrafts and neolithic value system, I'm hardly going to cry foul."

Hannibal actually laughs at that, a sharp deep hum that Will feels from the top of his head down into his feet, kind of like the sensation of another person brushing his hair. It makes him feel hesitant to look over, like he's too obvious.

"Oh, they've already gotten tired of me," Hannibal says with an elegant shrug. "Mr. Zeller and Mr. Brown are quite determined to find something nefarious in all the tree planting, meat

smoking, and jam canning. I'm sure given another couple of days, they'll be convinced that we're speaking Lithuanian to circumvent being understood by them rather than it being natural to us. Miss Lounds would have similar feelings, but I gather she just wants to ensure her paper, or article I suppose, is published before the others. She seems to be under the impression we're pulling wool over people's eyes, and has been quite difficult with Mischa."

"Hopefully soft wool," Will nods, and minds his steps. The ground beneath them is sloping to meet the creek, trees thinning. "Mischa does seem to be the one with most of the conventional answers."

"For good reason," Hannibal replies, letting a hand loose to swig at his side, another in the front pocket of his dark-blue pants. "She lives this every day. I am happy to show you this as our most time-honored week, and will strut you around the property as my guest as I technically own the place, as the saying goes, but Mischa is the constancy here," says Hannibal. "There are few that can rival her interest and adherence to tradition."

"Were your parents like that? Before...well, before."

Hannibal nods. "It's what made them the target of the Communist Party's ire. The Soviet Union held no love for any religion other than the vision of brotherly equality in labor, barring the officials of course," he adds with a smile. "They never did find a strong footing here. The Lithuanians are a proud people, and one of the first to leave the Union, even before the formal dissolution. Given another hundred years, perhaps even our stubbornness will see Christianity removed."

The forest opens up to the rolling path and hills down to the lake, a grand navy-dark body that sits still and unmarked save for a few birds cutting across its surface. Not a single summer house or dock mars its banks, and only one beach cuts between high reeds and swampy marshland that expands to either side. A few rowan trees sit in the sleepy heat near it, branches alive with the hissing of insects and white showy blossoms.

Will admires a stand of cattails in the shoreline grasses, and takes lazy wide steps around the dampening ground. They stand at the water's edge, watching the sun reflect on the shallow waves, hiding the fathoms below. He doesn't see them, but knows in the shallows there are fish, and bubbles against the grass, and small hopeful growing things hiding in the murk.

(*“Cast out at th’ reeds,” says Beau, reel clicking in his hands, drawing spidery clear fishing line back towards him while you crouch in the bright white fiberglass of an old boat. He’s not really thinking about you right now - maybe thinking out loud. “S’where all the baitfish are, and y’ain’t eatin’ lunch in th’ middle of th’ water if you’s a bass.” All the best foods are in hole-in-the-walls. All the best drinks are behind hard-to-find doors.*)

“Reverence of fresh water is universal,” Will says, going from grass tops to rippling water again with his eyes.

Hannibal stares out as well, eyes low to cut the reflections burning upwards. “Knowledge passes from the earth through it. It reshapes the land in glaciers, rain, rivers, floods, growing things. A physical force for change, and through it, paths to listen and whisper to stronger things.”

“Living in a commune and worshipping the sun and moon while making folk goods seems like it’s a bit outside the average stubbornness, but I can see the appeal when you look at places like this,” Will says, pointing his chin out to the water.

“Certainly,” Hannibal smiles. “A harder life than a return to standard practices, but why consume anything that you can’t grow, make, or hunt by your own means? It itches my teeth to eat a meal I had no hand in.”

“So what, you do the lecture circuit, come home to teach a few days out of the week in the city, and otherwise drive out here to...plow the field and make regional delicacies?”

Hannibal laughs again in a breath, sharp points of teeth catching his lip. “Not too far from the truth. We all have our strengths. As you saw, I provide for the wayside crosses and the estate, and bring in new people to observe on occasion.”

Will’s mouth twists. “And adopt misfit children.”

Hannibal shakes his head to that, but does pause for a long consideration of that thought. “Every faith requires adherents...it just so happens radical change is often a province of the young and directionless, and America is full of directionless children. If someone wishes to

forge a path for themselves and they can find the human connection they need through us, I am hardly one to say they're unwelcome. The more the merrier, really."

"I think you have a type," Will says, "if the few people I've talked to are anything to go by."

"And how many people the quiet Will Graham talks to. Like calls to like," Hannibal replies, gazing up into the branches of the tree nearest to them. "We are hardly fretting about our ratio of native born citizens to foreigners, and I talk to a great many people as well, Will. You either ascribe to our concept of family and seek us out to live here, or you do not. I just happen to have the highest odds of meeting someone unknown to us while traveling abroad. In turn, Mischa's simply the best suited to guiding and teaching the community, our own little sun burning brightly."

Will hums at that - his constant redirection to Mischa and ritual, absent of his own intentions.

Will supposes he's the moon, something darker and harder to understand, shown in parts, only half a face visible and the other half unknown. Who charts a night god's valleys and lakes and whispers into them? He can respect that maybe the fullness of Hannibal's surfaces can't be drawn or described. Will doesn't know what his own surface has become like these days, disrupted by the impact of passing calamity, throwing bits of him around.

"You seem a bit more revered than that," says Will, shrugging off the dust of that train of thinking. "All that great many people you talk to and all - I was told I was lucky to get a seat at your lecture in DC."

"It is only right that you did," says Hannibal. "I think you were meant to be here, Will. Our shared dedication to truth isn't as different as your experiences and college major would suggest."

"That what, death is inevitable, and we're just a series of life events away from watching or participating in it?"

(*"No," says Daddy. "Nothin' special this year," he sighs, and takes a long drink of his beer, going warm in his hand. You consider this line over and over, ad nauseum. You're the detail*

guy, the smart ass that knows what everyone actually means. How did you not understand the importance of this? Was there any importance? Had he made a decision already when he said it? Did he make it as he cleared the can of the room-temperature swill, some parts carbonation, other parts spit, the last consumption of a hard and disappointing life?)

Hannibal continues on, oblivious of Will's memory, but gentle. "I find that inherently comforting, don't you? Time of death was a common phrase at the emergency room operating table the way that blessings are common at the dinner table. I might as well treat it the same," Hannibal says, perfectly serious. Will blinks the glaze of his eyes away - he does find it comforting. He found it comforting the first time he heard it in the lecture, too. He just wishes he felt similarly secure in it.

"Do you ever feel unsure about anything?" asks Will, voice flat throat tight. He sounds normal, but he isn't. He's wading out into the water in front of them, from knees to waist, from chest to neck, until it's running into his ears and his mouth and he doesn't have to think about how absolutely not normal he is again for the millionth time in half a year.

He breathes in through his nose, continuing on. "I mean, shitty of me to ask, but you keep saying it's a good thing I'm here, everything is preordained, so on and so forth, and all I can think about is that it was a mistake, and now I can't undo it." It sounds bad, the same way his friends looking for infamy sounds bad when spoken aloud. It sounds worse because it's him, and he's a spectator to it being given form.

"Nothing can be undone, only learned from," Hannibal says, and the determination of how he says it makes Will look up, even against the sun reflecting on the lake's surface to know what's written in the other man's face. "You listen for knowledge in a book or in a classroom, but wisdom comes from experiencing it."

The water, like the bonfire light and the strong drinks and sitting by himself, drives a knife-like pain behind his eyes. He looks down instead to the ground, where heather rises in clusters from the bogged down earth, with their unbloomed spears of blue and white cutting upwards from the reeds as bones do from a carcass. His stomach sours at the idea. A scholar of dead things, Hannibal had called him earlier.

"I liked it better when some of it was impartial knowledge instead of wisdom," he says, rubbing the bridge of his nose, glasses pushed up. He swallows around the tightness of his neck, and a fluttering heartbeat.

(*“No,” says Daddy. “Nothin’ special this year.”*)

(*Breathe it, breathe out. Stay calm. Don't let this happen again. Be the normal adult that you should be when interacting with professors of philosophy and doctors of medicine, the respectful son of a Southern man that brought you up to pay attention and not interrupt, even when there’s an undercurrent of incoming disaster under your skin that demands interruption.*)

Will fidgets. He keeps his arms crossed, one hand worrying at the fabric of his shirt, the other pushing nail tips into the skin of his arm.

He wants to hide in a bathroom, or put his head under a faucet and listen to the white noise of it. Beverly can knock once to ask if he wants food. He’ll email the instructors and say he can’t confirm undergraduates attendance. He’ll think of throwing out his father’s ten years of car repair documents, and photos of *his* own service member father dead in the Vietnam War, and pretend that’s ok, he only wanted to bring back two extra suitcases when it was all done.

(*You wanted to be here. You accepted the invite. Nobody promised you that you wouldn’t be challenged, or sad, or not sure what to do with a handsome man’s undivided attention that you don’t know whether to read as intellectual or affectionate, or that your father wouldn’t hide behind every blade of grass to ambush what’s left of your calm.*)

Hannibal is saying something. Hannibal is saying something and he needs to pay attention and nod when appropriate. Will blinks again against the glare of the day, watery eyed but head straight and looking at the side of Hannibal’s face.

“--is informed by your observation and your intuition. One is a skill, the other a blessing. The drawback is that it’s a knife without a handle to have both. You either suffer with it, or you accept that you must bandage your hands against it and use it.”

(*It’s true - you could just grab a knife and use it. Just destroy things that get in the way of your happiness.*)

Will looks down at his hands. They look ashy black, a negative of what should be there. He looks back up, closes his eyes, and licks at his lips.

“Will?”

“I’m sorry,” Will says, one hand coming up to pull a little at the hair on the top of his head to ground himself. It shakes as it grabs fingerfulls of curling locks. His heart is heaving in his chest, but he can’t breathe fast enough through his nose to keep pace. Will turns to look at the small stand of rowan trees, the white flowers like foam throughout the glossy green leaves. When he shuts his eyes, they are still there, neon white and undulating with his pulse. “I’m sorry I brought this up. I need to…” The breeze moves the branch. “I think I need to…”

He bends down, arms thrown over his knees.

(*Throw up? Catch your breath? Sink into the banks of mud, wash your hands in it until you find bedrock underneath? What if there is none, you just a lonely man-shaped rock left behind to bend over and be still? Glaciation leaves the stone at the oak’s grove - perhaps a different force is leaving you here to disappear, either bathed in morning dew or forgotten.*)

Hannibal doesn’t let him disappear though - he finds Will in his crouch on the ground, balancing on his feet in a crouch of his own. Will looks at the tips of the boots again, remarkably clean, save for the water spots that are growing more abundant as the days pass. Well used, he thinks, serving their purpose in dignity.

“S-sorry, sorry,” he hisses. His face is sweaty, but it is also wet where he is crying, and he doesn’t know when that started. “I’m usually better at avoiding this.”

“Do you need to be?” Hannibal asks quietly. “I think it’s quite lovely. I think there’s nothing you shouldn’t say or feel as long as it serves what you need.”

“Weren’t you the one going on about truth being unalterable when spoken?” Will says down into the grass, not ready to look up. “Gods and birds and whoever has to hear it having to be careful with fate?”

“Honesty is a charge and a gift.”

“You’ll get tired of hearing *my honesty* . Everyone does eventually,” Will says with a swallow, wiping his face with a grass-wet hand. “You don’t even know me, not really, and despite thinking it’s a gift, I suspect you might be the least honest person here,” Will blurts with growing fervor.

(*It always rattles out of you like this - these certainties.*)

There’s quiet between them, and the sounds of the woods behind them, and the lapping of water before them. Will wants to jump into it, so he doesn’t have to deal with the fallout of this hour. Good job, he tells himself. Way to prove a point. A sterling standard of truth that he doesn’t even have enough information to say is factual. Avoidance of hard questions isn’t dishonesty. A polite public face to cover private emotion isn’t either. His gut is usually right, but his gut doesn’t seem to work the way it used to.

Hannibal helps him off the ground, pulling Will by the arm and bracing him at the small of his back when he stumbles. When Will gets the nerve to look up and thank him after wiping his forearm across his sore eyes, he still gets no anger or frustration from the other man. Only a ponderous, warm look - proud.

“And that’s why your honesty is so lovely after all,” Hannibal says. “Novel in its purity.” His hands come up to find Will’s face, and Will allows it, the way he allows it in the grove, wishing away the hot steam of an animal’s thunderous breath. The pressure of his palms feels so good against the burning there, fingers scratching gently at the baby hairs on either side of his face.

“I baselessly insulted you,” Will mumbles, embarrassed. “That doesn’t seem very pure to me.”

“But I know why you did,” Hannibal retorts, “and context forgives a great many things. It’s cruel to punish natural impulses. You are exactly where you are meant to be,” he says again, “and I was meant to hear whatever comes after.”

Will nods against the glare of a long hot day, a crescent over either eye when Hannibal brings his thumbs up to trace his brows. Will wonders why that would be true, but doesn't feel like asking because he doesn't feel ready for the answer, at least for today. Clarity of purpose, he remembers Hannibal saying, and prays for some of his own. He imagines again the runes between the man's fingers, pressing their magic calm and purpose into him instead.

The walk back to the house isn't quick, but neither is it rushed - Will's still feeling out of sorts, sore, and burnt out from his moment of weakness on the lakeside, and the scuff of the soles of his shoes against the ground doesn't do much to hide it. Fortunately, Hannibal takes this with grace, and finds other things to fill the gaps in conversation: hiking the Finnmark fjords of Norway as a university student, visiting the old growth trees of the Polish Białowieża forest to see what an older Lithuania might have been like, how his aunt likes her tea on rainy days. His lecturer's voice is put away for the candor of someone enjoying a chat on the porch of a house, or in the warm rainwater sitting at the curb in Sandusky.

(*You shake that off - it's somewhere Hannibal's never been, and that he fits into the way a hole burnt into a photo fits a picture.*)

He takes him down another path to the north that they haven't yet used as a group before, while Will tries to blink the hurt from temple to jaw away. There are more tall spruces this way, the space beneath them cavernous, night-dark, and hollowed out of branches from winter taking them over and over again. He pictures his deer here, the way he did for the hidden wayside cross, laying in the sphagnum moss and pressing him deeper into the ground with it's bulk, hiding the reality currently pressing against his eyes.

They pass the occasional swamped ground, wooden logs carved out to make simple crossings between low pools of water, white bell headed flowers sitting sleepy between wide-spade leaves and the green rocks, smelling sweet and cloying.

(*"Poisonous," Hannibal says, "but a traditional symbol of happiness and fidelity."*)

They wander this way for what feels like hours in silence, occasionally stopping when Will needs to stare between gaps in the trunks, and wipe his face clean once more. In a few of them, he doesn't know it needs to be done until the broad palm of Hannibal's hand is already doing it. The other man doesn't comment on it, only changes subjects.

Will warns him that walking him around the woods after having mental health crises may be habit forming if the pattern of the last two days is anything to go by. Hannibal says he hopes so.

and close your eyes with holy dread

The wandering is meditative - the *shh-shh-shh* of boots between grass and ferns its own kind of metronome, while Hannibal's stories punctuate time between the different stands of trees. Will feels like there's nothing left in his head to leak out in whatever rebellion his body is opting for these days. *Sorry for the explosive anxiety all over the side of your very nice ancestral lake* , he wants to say. *Did you say you were paying for airfare? Maybe you should rethink that and charge patient fees instead.*

The afternoon has come to a point where the daylight is yellowing in the shafts of sun that break through the forest, and Will has to acknowledge he has taken a lot of Hannibal's time. Sunset's still a long ways off, and the relief of dinner and eventual sleep, and Hannibal says there's a hunt tomorrow. The largest of several in the three days that span the middle of the nine day week, in fact. Perhaps the same thing that Tobias had spoken of just this morning - a tradition that needed verification, like it's secret, or perverse. Will wonders at that.

"You mentioned that being something you did," Will asks with a small frown, face still tight and sticky. He's trying at equilibrium now, shy of being tended to. "Hunting. Is it something you enjoy?"

Hannibal brows rise slightly. "What do you think?"

Fleet footed. Quiet. Quick with a shovel in hand to find delusional interlopers when surprised. (*He wouldn't have struck you yesterday, you repeat. He didn't recognize it was you at first. You think he might have struck if you had been anyone else, but your gut says not you.*) Will's sure he's not the kind of creature that was meant to hold a rifle, but he is the kind to have claws for knives.

(*Why are you still thinking about this?*)

“I think you said you weren’t into meals you had no hand in. Hunting and butchery are representative of an entire food group.”

“Well balanced meals are important, Will,” Hannibal replies with a half smile, teeth flashing, shy of being misunderstood. “I am a better butcher than I am a shot, but there’s expectations to hold up, and I find myself in a better mental space if I consider what exactly it is that I’m after and how I mean to catch it. Preparing a snare or designing a drive is the skillful work - firing a gun and field dressing are chores.”

Will gives a little half smile too, turning to look at a shadowed glade nearby, tempered with shallow pools. “I guess cutting meat goes hand in hand with surgery,” he says, feeling that idea out.

“It certainly does,” Hannibal replies, “no great differences between the clay that makes man and beast.”

That feels right, even if the token protest in him rises up. Sovereignty of humanity or some shit - it’s all muscle when push comes to shove. It all breaks down the same in soil, or the mouths of small crawling things.

Will shakes it off. “Boar is what you said you had to get paperwork for, right? What else is in season?” he asks. “I’m not much of a shot myself, but I’ve gone after small game birds and deer back in the day. Cheap vacation and grocery trip to boot, if you asked Daddy.”

(*You think that might be the first time you bring him up without the brief pang of anxiety of who your Daddy is, what your Daddy is up to, how you explain that Daddy is a can of ashes the size of a coffee can, and the only reason he’s not in one is that the state of Louisiana had him shipped to you in a loaf-shaped tin, like they gifted you a fruitcake instead of a relative. Handle with care, said the box. Contains human remains. Hannibal already knows some of this. The blank spaces are intentional.*)

“I hesitate to say,” Hannibal hums, amused. “Seasonality is rather arbitrary when it comes to hunger.”

“Aren’t seasonal holidays equally arbitrary?”

“Touché,” the other man laughs, hands spread palms up ahead of Will. “Hunting has been a pastime of the nobility and the government officials in Lithuania for the last few hundred or so years, though western methods of wildlife management have begun to expand. We certainly have not ceded our rights to hunt on our grounds in whatever fashion we see fit, kings, faithful comrades, or otherwise.”

“Not one for government regulation?”

“Not one for disavowing rights to game away based on what amounts to a lottery and a pissing match, forgive the expression," Hannibal replies, shoulders tight. "I don’t require a mount of red deer horns to measure my prowess - I simply eat the deer, or whatever else has the unlucky destiny to find the edges of the woods here. It’s apparently a controversial opinion, if you ask your friends. I have no doubt it’s the only drama of note they found while prowling around for it, other than perhaps people choosing to live out here.”

Will hums, thinking back to breakfast in Vilnius, and how little anyone has to suggest Hannibal Lecter is anything more odious than unconventional or extremely old-fashioned. Colleagues of the doctor are suspicious of the Lecters’ and their followers’ dedication to the rural lifestyle. The kind of people who screech at underaged drinking, or can’t look at the reality of inherited habit - smoking, shooting as a teenager in the backwoods at tins cans, pheasants, deer.

(*Men, who have the temerity to walk through your father’s patch of oak brush while in Missouri and the Ozark Lakes for a brief spell. “Shh,” he says, when you fret at him taking pot shots into the foliage - “they done know better.”*)

He has to respect it - Hannibal’s as cavalier about ignoring the rules surrounding hunting rights as he is about appropriate dress, and his casualness with academics trying to find a string to pull and unravel until criticism comes back to him, and how he likes to guide Will around by the unobtrusive press of a thumb and two fingers to the back of his arm.

(*You twitch every time you notice it, wanting to hide the sensitive vulnerability of your ribs, and also lean into it - no one usually touches you. You die a little at the hours-old memory of hands on your face, still too new to know how to put it away.*)

“I get the vibe you’ve had a few critics,” Will nods. “Ignoring local officials probably doesn’t help with explaining off the collection of foreign young people you seem to draw in, wittingly or not.”

Hannibal smiles at Will’s sidestep. “Ah, I am reminded - back to Miss Hobbs, as you asked from the start. Forgive me Will, I find the long path back to the point to be the more complete one.”

It is, in some ways. Will has more context he didn’t have before. Hannibal too, he guesses, walking him through his He feels more at ease, thinking of her wide looks and careful demeanor. “Understandable, he shrugs. “I’m sure you didn’t really anticipate not only sponsoring a summer camp, but also serving as a guidance counselor.”

Will dislikes the reminder of this, how he needs constant tending, and switches away from it, feeling the tight stretch of his skin of his over-rubbed eyes. “So what’s Abigail’s deal? She’s one of your cultural adoptees, isn’t she, or is there a surprising number of Lithuanians living in Minnesota that I haven’t heard about?”

Hannibal shakes his head. “Her arrival here is another facet of our hunting culture in some ways. Abigail came here with her father, in the winter last January. Lithuania doesn’t allow many hunting rights for land owners, but disproportionately favors the clubs, of which Mr. Hobbs went through as an avid deer hunter of a mind to take a red deer from our grove. I allowed him to hunt with his daughter on the property as a concession to the game wardens, and they became acquainted with us during their stay. There was...an incident.”

Will can see it - the long red scar, never fully hidden because flax fabric doesn’t drape right at the neck.

“The scar,” he says.

Hannibal nods. “Yes, I’m afraid so. It’s not my story to tell, suffice to say that Mr. Hobbs wasn’t well, and Abigail found herself in the unenviable position of having to defend herself from her father’s poor judgement. She was of age when it happened, and she opted to stay

with us rather than return to the States when all was said and done. No loose ends to tie up at home and no desire to return, as is the case with many here."

"No mother to go to?" asks Will, painfully reminded of his own circumstances and fully aware of the answer. The Lecter commune orphans shed parents like their sacred trees do their leaves.

Hannibal doesn't respond, only gives him a look, striding over grass and moss and stretches of land that can be measured in steps and seconds and heartbeats. "What do you think?" he asks as he did earlier, when the house comes into view, and the shapes of white clad men and women in the eaves of the house.

Will doesn't answer. He's in the habit of stating what's obvious to him, but Hannibal's keen marking of it before he's even said it is both gratifying and hard to navigate. *What do you think* is *why do you ask something you already know* .

He doesn't need to - ask, or point things out. It's assumed he's made an assessment already. It's different. It's nice.

He listens instead to birds warbling, and the passing of geese overhead. A breeze trickles into the canopy, and there are crickets somewhere in the high grass, and people laughing in the shadow of the stone-walled manor. They amble in companionable silence, Hannibal's boots on the hard-packed dirt to the pavers becoming a powerful *clop clop* next to his light-footed shoes, muddy with silt from the banks of the lake and moss mounds.

(*There's a man who tells you that you have a talented gift for truth. You didn't expect him to in turn have a talent for recognizing it. It's a little disconcerting - what else does he assume you already understand?*)

Mischa doesn't meet them at the entrance of the house, though with the sun westering and the sweat beginning to dry at his neck, Will thinks it's something of a miracle that she doesn't. She never seems far from Hannibal, now that he's at home where she can reach him. Instead,

Matthew does, coming around the thick frame of the main back door like he lived just behind it the whole time, waiting. His eyes cut from Hannibal to Will.

“Doctor Lecter, Will...long walk?” he asks.

Will feels his mouth twist. *Why yes* , he wants to say. *As opposed to a short one where we return in a timely fashion, and I don’t monopolize a borderline stranger’s time for a full afternoon?* Matthew doesn’t deserve this of course, but Will is done with the day, as much as he can be. Hannibal is much more reasonable, giving him a look that reads less bothered and more keenly amused.

“Just contemplating the lilies on the paths,” says Hannibal, and heads inside with no greater fanfare than a glance to the sealed side door to the kitchen and cold storage “They smell quite sweet this late in the season.”

(*Just walking you around to cry between ferns and pretend at adult conversation. You appreciate the lie, even if you bristle at an untruth.*)

Matthew’s eyes cut between the two of them with reptilian calculation, but he outwardly smiles. It’s flat, but it counts for something. “Just making sure Will hadn’t gotten lost,” he says. “Your sister was just saying how easy it is to get turned around and lose the roads.”

“So it is,” Hannibal replies, turning his head to watch Will follow. His smile is sunny, confident. “Best consider that you don’t know them all that well yourself, Mr. Brown. Even the best of us misread the situation from time to time.”

Matthew doesn’t have much to say to that, and Will, never really knowing how to handle awkward in-betweens like this, lets the cool stone of the house shade him and call him in deeper. Whatever it is that Matthew has misread, Will hesitates to probe deeper.

Will excuses himself to try and sleep off his headache, though when passing through the kitchen, he is again offered tea by an idle Jurgita, the same acrid brew Mischa gives him that takes the edge off very quickly. (*“Willow bark,” she explains, when Mischa can’t be found. “Helps with headaches - I drink it all the time for migraines. Comes with the territory of being crazy, or something.”*) He downs the entire mug with the sort of childish relief that drinking a glass of coke and ice brings after swimming, and has to shut his eyes against the nostalgic certainty of that. He is wrapped in a towel. He is drying on the pavement next to a pool. It’s a surprise to himself when he finds he’s standing at the foot of his narrow bed half undressed instead, staring into the headboard like it’s a gravestone.

(*Did you undress yourself? Have you been casting your tunic and mantle in the halls, tearing them in your on-and-off grief like King David in golden halls, or is someone tearing them for you?*)

The little brilliant amber colored discs of sunlight coming through the window and mute quiet of the thick castle walls eventually cocoon him into rest, and only Hannibal’s hand coming to gently shake him awake in the evening is enough to stir him. He doesn’t dream again, and the fizzing hum behind his eyes drops its shadows long enough for him to get ready for the evening’s bonfire to come live in them instead.

Will isn’t the most engaging of guests by his estimation. He sits at meals with the perpetual discomfort of one meeting distant relatives, that all know his name and know where his father went to school, and that he shares absolutely no memories with, only that he’s “Beau’s boy”, or “Evie’s son”. He doesn’t go out of his way to remedy this - he has the few people he considers friends, and colleagues he’s friendly with, and at one point his father. He can share meals and anecdotes with *them* .

This is perhaps why the tacit invitations that Hannibal extends to Will starting from the May lecture onwards don’t feel like they’re his to accept. These are activities done with loved ones. Will only has a few of those, and they are dwindling in the face of his ennui, professional cold ambitions, and more recent detachment from reality.

(*Were you very attached to it before? It’s the kind of detail you exclude for brevity, but seems important.*)

This isn't really Hannibal's fault - Will suspects if he showed one iota of interest in the kinds of offerings they make to the fire and the crosses, the position of new trees to plant, or how to make mead, or the content of Hannibal's tattoos instead of mere questions about the number or the purpose of them, Hannibal would be pleased to tell him more than he really needs to know, or hand him off to Mischa who has made a life out of accommodating these kinds of things. There are no secret recipes. There aren't rooms in the house that are unwelcome to visitors, only closed for convenience. You simply have to be respectful.

After being guided around like a stray dog for the better part of an afternoon, Will rather suspects Hannibal wouldn't hand him off either.

(*He watches your mouth, in anticipation of your words and the way you stare into nothing - you are foolishly hoping perhaps he watches all facets of it, not just your clumsy way of calling out disaster with them, or sucking in breaths between crying. You feel stupid and young even considering it. He's years older than you, and you've always had a hard time differentiating kindness from affection, but the casualness of being handled like you should be feels so good, and after all, you are a stupid boy who thinks too much about things you have no business putting your nose into.*)

(*It's not your business, but it doesn't mean you're not good at it.*)

Perhaps it is because of Hannibal's non-confrontational style of introducing a culturally nuanced holiday that Will doesn't really expect to be asked to participate either.

Alana volunteers, quite happily during the days it seems. She is with the group in the fields, or at the table, or at the grove. (*"* Alkas *," she gently corrects as Mischa did, admiring a stand of small ash trees, still young and bushy from the window of one of the sitting rooms. Beverly jokes that she's going native. Alana tells her that's inappropriate. You rub your head and ignore their wavering voices.*) The others observe, and occasionally talk amongst themselves, strangers in a strange land. Matthew, after this afternoon's encounter, is not easily catalogued, but seems poised for something. Will absorbs, and waits to saturate with it and fade into the ninety faces to celebrate it. Hannibal is important and busy, and has other plans, as men of his stature and societal prominence often do.

Tonight's fire is moved instead to the back of the house instead of the empty drive that leads up to it, the tables in long lines to keep everyone together and brotherly like the night before. "I think the idea is to celebrate the night before the hunt facing the actual spot we're going to do it," Abigail explains, setting out silverware with the dutiful look of any youngest child setting up for Thanksgiving. "Mood building, maybe? It's kind of stupid, if you think in terms of disturbing the prey, but I guess it's the closest you can get to camping near your starting point."

Down the way, Alana is again with Margot, laying out tablecloths and taking long breaks to point out people, things, funny grey and white egrets gathering in the trees and stretching their necks as evening comes in. They are pink-cheeked and smiling. They are not thinking about Brian's strange questions, or the immediacy of their fast friendship. They just enjoy.

Will does his best to keep his eyes away from them. He's happy, he tells himself, that Alana has a new friend. And maybe he is, and merely feels a little bereft in the absence of everyone but the young woman at his side, fussing with a tray full of utensils.

(*"We broke up months ago, Will," says Alana at the front door of the apartment, arms crossed, hair straight and orderly over her shoulder. She does that - throws it behind her, like she's doing work and doesn't want to be distracted by it. Your heart's a little sore, but only a little - a break up hurts, but Daddy's alive in this time, and the months coming are much more harrowing. "I can't just keep coming over and acting like we didn't."*)

"Have a lot of deer and pigs nibbling on the garden to disturb?" asks Will, staring at fork tines, switching his thoughts to tattooed runes again when he sees their shining points. He should ask what they mean one of these times, not just if they ruin job prospects, as one does when they miss the prompt and sail past to a different one.

"Hardly ever," she shrugs. "Maybe bed down in the wheat from time to time when it gets colder, but they don't come up to the house. Mischa says it's a respect thing, that they get run off or eaten if they do. Hannibal and some of the others aren't the type to pick and choose opportunities, though they have a few superstitions about when they can or can't do things."

Will smiles. "A little judgemental there, calling it superstition. Maybe it just makes the anticipation more enjoyable for when they can."

She shrugs. “I’m here because it’s practical to be around people that value the same things I do. I’m still working on the religion part. I’m not a Balt,” she says, the way one says the sky is blue, or that one isn’t part of a department.

“Seems like the kind of thing you either accept or you don’t.”

She considers that, flipping a butter knife from side to side next to a plate. “I accept the important parts - sacred nature, the value of working with your hands, commitment to family...I don’t know about the symbolism, or the burning and burying things. But I do know how to stalk and drive deer, and the big party next to your quarry’s home is kind of dumb.”

Abigail continues on, straightening forks. “We’ll do another night like this on the fifth night, the evening before the actual solstice happens so that people can wander during the twilight hours in the grove and down to the lake. I don’t know the whole story, but something about magical ferns.”

“Another superstition?” he teases. “Sounds legit,” Will nods with a snort hiding behind a cough for her benefit - not because of the magic ferns, but because of Abigail’s look of abject teenage disgust.

An adult legally, but very much a child still. He’d call her a kid in any of the classes he assisted for, though she’s really not that much more of a kid than Will, all things considered. Maybe 6 or 7 years between them. He wishes she were here because she was into proto-language religions instead of her family by birth being a disaster. Not that different from Will on that account as well. They could be siblings, like Mischa and Hannibal, dead parents between them.

A hand comes to rest on the rise of his neck from his shoulders.

“Now Will,” comes the hissing sound directly in his ear, sweet and feminine. Speak of the devil and she doth appear, Will thinks. “Let’s not tease. Finding a magic fern flower is one of the oldest euphemisms between the Baltic Sea and Russia. Have a heart for the Scandivanians and Soviets and our jokes - we get in trouble if the Catholics hear we’re thinking about fornicating.”

Will flinches a little into Abigail, who is stifling a grin at the look on his face, surely. (*Maybe you're more of a child than you thought, too.*) By the heat from his ears to his chest, Will knows he is glowing with embarrassment. Mischa sidles up next to him, red dressed and red mouthed as she is every night. Hannibal leans against a long table, perfectly at ease and academic, stray hand setting another piece of silverware straight. He is too polite to laugh at the joke, but his sister is grinning and smug, and Will suspects he is laughing all the same. Will ponders how much they heard. By the brief glance Abigail gives them, he thinks she's wondering the same.

Abigail shrugs, breaking the moment. "More on that later, I guess," she says with a roll of her eyes. "Nothing like a scavenger hunt in the middle of the night to get you going."

"Spoken truly like someone who hasn't made up an excuse to be by themselves with someone," Mischa says with a scrunched nose and a high look to the pinking sky. "Though speaking of disappearing into the woods - Will, you're hunting tomorrow, aren't you?"

Will blinks, eyes still a bit sore, and tries to process that.

"Am I supposed to?" he asks.

Hannibal cuts in, standing straight again. Will thinks of the apartment kitchen, what feels like a million years back now. "I insist," Hannibal continues for his sister. "As is the tradition in our house for your first Rasos. You can be a part of my party," he explains, and looks positively devious at the brief hesitation on Will's face, pressing his advantage. "It's a right of passage for young people with the talent and the inclination, a tenet of how we feed our family and gods. This is Abigail's first opportunity for the year, and I have been remiss in ensuring you were participating as well. Consider it a request."

(*He entertained you and wiped your eyes for the better part of an afternoon - is it a big ask for you to wander the woods again, this time with a big gun, and make the appropriate approving sounds when someone inevitably blows the lungs out of some oversized pig in exchange?*)

Will, beleaguered, shuffles his feet a bit, gives the table a long look, and rolls with the punch. "So maybe lay off the little glasses of alcohol before going into the forest with a gun I'm not licensed to use?"

Hannibal smiles. “Far be it for me to tell you not to indulge, or that anyone other than me needs to give you permission to use firearms here. In fact I encourage doing both.”

“Violent delights have violent ends, I think is the correct response to that,” Will shrugs, “but I’ll go along, if that’s the done thing,” he adds, straightening a spoon and a knife at a place setting. “I’m not much of a shot or a butcher - lack the inclination I guess.”

Hannibal and Mischa share a look, but Hannibal looks back to Will and gives him a long, thoughtful smile. “I suspect you have more of the inclination that you think,” he replies. “I look forward to seeing your skill as the occasional backcountry hunter you are,” he says with a wry glance, eyes roving over Will’s flushed face which has again gone red with embarrassment.

“I can’t decide if you’re a masochist or a sadist for wanting to see,” Will jokes, “but sure, yeah...I’ll give it the old college try.”

Hannibal’s smile grows teeth, as does Mischa’s. Abigail just watches on.

It’s strange, the synchronicity of the siblings when they have a need for it, or allow it to be seen. Their similar bearing and insular humor endears them to each other, even as Mischa’s blunt manner is a contrast to her brother’s cutting edge, sharp enough to not know the incision is made, fingers curling under the flesh to pull. They are both made silver and gold in the evening’s dwindling sun. Their found family is pulled close by this lustre. People like to please, and people especially like to please beautiful people.

She clucks something to Hannibal and pats Will on the shoulder, light footed and fleet as a doe as she goes to welcome someone. Will watches the red hem of her dress as she goes, unfurling as a trumpet flower does. There’s a feast to attend to, and people to lead in whatever constitutes prayer in the humid night. Torches to throw, tidy packets of cloth-bound offerings to toss, and smoke to dance around, red meat to pull off bones and tall glasses of homebrewed beer to drink.

“It’ll be your offering to toss tomorrow,” Hannibal says before he leaves. “Laima has decided. Your sharp eyes will make sure of it.”

“Doubtful,” Will replies and waves him off. “But here’s hoping your confidence is infectious.”

People shuffle in as Hannibal goes, Will and Abigail watching them take up their seats and their utensils with the expectation of people accustomed to this. Routine for the regulars, and a matter of progressive desensitization for the foreigners. The tables are decked with their green leaves and herbs, the candles, the earthenware bowls and plates of another night’s food paraded out from the side door of the pantry.

Will hasn’t seen proper gluttony before, not the way that people get before midnight here. He hasn’t seen where people go off to rest other than his own bed, which he closes his eyes to only because there’s a cat-eyed woman that owns the place with sweet and sour teas who will pat his head and send him to bed with brews that sit on his tongue and teeth. Her hawk-eyed brother tells tales, and slinks between the trunks of trees, and the folding doors of cheap apartments, and the grand halls of universities, unseen.

He doesn’t remember what it’s like before here to eat in a big crowd, or be sent to bed with a good story, or to sleep with someone nearby, too used to cold sheets to either side of his legs, no night blooming ferns here. Abigail’s skepticism is reasonable, or maybe it’s just what siblingless misfits understand.

Will hasn’t hunted since high school. It’s one of the few things he shares with his father, receiving instruction with bored disdain in his youth, but he receives it all the same because that’s how he’s been brought up. Beau Graham hasn’t hunted (*will not hunt anymore*) since his only son doesn’t come back for his first winter break in Virginia during his undergraduate, pleading deadlines, work, and concern about if his car can make it back down south this time. Beau asks Will if it’s an issue of money, and Will avoids answering until it’s too late to really change course.

Will thinks this is where the first of Beau’s darker thoughts start gaining traction in hindsight. When this epiphany happens in the unremarkable office of the GWU counselor when Will seeks help getting control of his sleep cycle, the mental blackouts, and the irritability following Beau’s death, the counselor thinks this is where Will needs to seek higher level

therapy, and calls Professor Crawford like Professor Crawford is apt to fix this kind of thing. Will works in forensics - it's not like there's an appreciation for good mental health outside of not cracking like a pot and doing something heinous.

(*"Have you ever been seen by a psychiatrist for identity disorders or schizophrenia?" she asks very kindly. You fixate on her horn-rimmed glasses, and the glitter of a silver chain holding them to her chest. She does well for herself, tenured, while you are crumbling month to month. You don't think she can really understand you, no matter what the books taught her. "You're in the risk age group, and I'm worried about you, Will."*)

He hates the idea of holding any gun these days. It wakes him from dead sleep many times back at home, gasping with the certainty that he should have taken a second shot on Christmas. There was no recovering that mess. There was no need for that to take another 11 minutes. There was something more he could have done than look on deaf and mute and holding the wireless phone while the 911 operator tries to make assurances. He hates the *will-he-won't-he* question that guns become, and that Alana spirits the remaining firearms out of Beau Graham's house to disappear into some sordid pawn shop in Alabama, because she recognized it for what the answer could be.

She whispers to Margot now, half a house away between people eating and talking and singing in the highlands of Lithuania. (*"* Dainos *," she corrects. She's into correcting the lot of you these days, gently, but with insistence. "You sing a* dainos .) Will considers if she'd do this all again tomorrow, and the day after and the day after, given the opportunity. He doesn't look over to check - she's having a nice night, and Will Graham is not.

It's just one day, he reasons, sitting with Abigail tonight at the table, brooding about tomorrow. His face aches from the pressure behind his eyes.

Abigail stays with him this time for dinner in the absence of Katherine, Jokūbas, Freddie, and now Tobias, the last of whom begs off tonight's entertainment to compile research notes, tapping away at a laptop more often than not. Abigail seems relieved at his absence, and Will wonders if the weird mood lingers between them after the morning's argument.

Brian is easily distracted by the local girls who ask a lot of questions while Matthew stands between them, eyes drifting between the conversation unfolding in front of him with the occasional jabbing question, and eyes working their way back to Abigail and Will, sometimes to Hannibal and Mischa. Beverly makes quick friends like Alana does, but makes more of a

point to go from table to table, asking about the kind of daily activities that are expected from commune members, who gets driving privileges, how they handle medical care.

(*"I can't seem to get a straight answer out of a single motherfucker here," she says into an open faced sandwich, eaten at the edges of a strawberry patch the day before. You experience a brief moment of satisfaction, watching the researchers fail to dig up whatever it is they're looking for, while you are softening like wax in the shade of the elderberry tree, watching people cull old vines in preparation for new.*)

Nobody's seen Freddie today, but nobody's particularly sorry that they haven't either. They think they see her snooping around the kitchen again, that there's other redheads here for the week that they could have mistaken her for, that many people speak excellent English and she'll be fine.

Dinner itself is wrist thick beef ribs crowded with summer vegetables, and soft cakes and tall glasses of syrupy and sour kisielius, because Abigail doesn't drink alcohol and Will doesn't want her to be the odd man out. (*That's your job.*) Even if she technically can in this country, she's not ready to, or at least not ready to raise a scope to shoot something the morning after with Hannibal lurking in the background somewhere. She feels obligated to succeed. She wants to be good company.

She doesn't speak Lithuanian either, which Will heartily relates to, so as the fire burns higher and the crowd more raucous, they get comfortable with the subject of hunting lodges, and old cowboys, and if it's actually important to bag and tag a five-pointer if all that you'll do is saw it's head off and mount it on the wall, deer sometimes too old or too sick to make good venison, and too heavy to carry anything else but the horns.

"Hannibal's not into leaving things behind. My dad wasn't either," Abigail explains, mouth twisting down, "but I'm into whatever's the most efficient."

They talk about winters at the edges of the Great Lakes, and the strange furrowed places of the Wisconsin Ice Age trail which Will saw once in high school and Abigail camped in for a 6th grade field trip, and what it's like to dress an animal in freezing temperatures.

"So much easier here, with the humidity and all," she says, and gets a distant look, presumably hands deep in the chest of some poor beast once more, determined to lighten a

burden. Will feels the chill of where she is in memory, no matter how close to the bonfire they sit, and tries his best to talk his way through the sweaty discomfort of not knowing if he's sympathetically warm or cold with the guts of another person's kill.

He turns his back to the flame to keep the glow of it from his eyes, and imagines it licking a path up his spine in winter fields, burning as it goes between green Alabama grass, pressboard flooring, the ugly brown carpet once more.

Mischa seeks Will later in the night when the blueness of the night deepens as much as it can, with the world pointed into the eye of the sun as it is. The celebrants never stop early, but even the most enthusiastic get the soot of the bonfire in their nose, and ready to go to bed for a hard morning of tracking.

She cuts between him and Matthew on their way back up to their shared room, Brian just ahead of them, sliding out from one of the hallway bedrooms with bare feet. Perhaps checking on another guest, or the girls who face the east side of the house rather than the grove. She wears one of those remarkably bland expressions that she shares with Hannibal that suggests deeper thoughts, not yet ready to be shared.

(*A trained dancer, you think, finally placing the look. Someone familiar with flexing knees and toes to the long rung of a barre, and finding a space for her mind to sit while she performs. You wonder if that's the same for both of them, shuffling music sheets in their heads, her flexing long, pointed toes, Hannibal tapping out a tempo on the steering wheel of the car or the tempo of spade meeting dirt* - crunch, crunch, crunch .)

But she smiles when she sees him, two earthenware mugs in hand, presumably one for him and one for herself as has come to be their shared habit for the week.

"Time for the nightcap?" asks Will, not really tired in his sobriety, but also not so awake that he wouldn't appreciate the assistance if he needs to get up early and pretend at being a functional adult that's safe around firearms. (*Shut up, shut up, no one wants to hear that.*) The warm walls of the mug will bring the feeling back into his hands, gone numb from sitting on them so long. He wanted to wipe at his face, and chase the cold sweat away from it, but there's only so many times you can do that before it's obvious he isn't well.

“Can’t have you going out into the woods feeling unlike yourself. That’s for the day *after* tomorrow,” she says with a wink and a pass of the mug. “This one’s a little different tonight - for your headache.”

Will doesn’t ask how she knows about it. He’s certain Hannibal’s told her between Will’s waking hours. There doesn’t seem to be much they don’t tell each other. He takes the drink gratefully, and she pushes the hair back from his face across his forehead. Her fingertips are cold, and Will does his best to not slump into them, grateful for them skating icily along his brow.

“Hannibal will wake you before the sun - best settle in for a few hours sleep,” she says quietly, and turns on her toes to glide back down the hall, hand snatched back like it was never there. Not a single board creaks under her weight, knowing exactly where to step.

(*Performance over, bow out, exit the stage.*)

When the bedroom door closes, Matthew continues to stare him down, sitting at the edge of his bed and watching Will take the tea with sipping gulps. It is a little different tonight - the earthy valerian, the licorice root, and a peppery-bitter tang that trails sweetly behind. It’s not quite sugary, but neither is it honeyed. Will doesn’t really care as long as it works.

He just wishes Matthew would stop looking at him.

“You seem chummy with them,” Matthew says after a few minutes, his hands propping him up from behind. He’s smiling, the narrow kind that isn’t nice. “Late night drinks. Long walks in the woods. They seem to like you. Go to a lot of trouble to make sure you’re settled.”

“Mischa and Hannibal are good hosts,” Will replies cautiously.

“Nice of them to give Alana and Beverly a break from it. Hardly seen you at all since we got here. Starting to think you’re following an established pattern for them.”

Will rolls a shoulder, and drinks more tea. He supposes it was coming - the retribution for Hannibal's chilly reception at the door. Will's own repeated dismissals.

"Welp," he says with a *pop* , sucking in a lip to lick the bitter water off of it, and pulling the glasses from his face to store on the little side table. His phone glares up at him - 12:14 am. "Always good to be making new friends, right? Haven't worn out my welcome the way I have at home, I guess."

That's what he's always afraid of. Being humored. He'd rather no one ever talk to him again than assume they're in his company as an indulgence. He'd rather blow his own head off, the way his friends speculate he might. It pains him to be led around by Alana, or Beverly, or Jimmy who at least has the tact to know that it's ok to leave him alone if he asks for it.

Matthew smiles with half his face - the other is unreadable. "I get it," he says. "Normal people don't understand you. They don't really understand me either."

(*No shit, you think. Maybe they would if Matthew didn't insist on finding scabs and slowly raising them. Have the decency to rip them off all at once like you do - make sure it hurts all at once and ends quickly.*)

"Do you want a medal for recognizing it?" Will asks waspishly. "Add it as a reward to your conspiracy forum as some sort of premium user flair?"

That lands about as well as he expected - the half-smile falls from the other man's face to land in the same unknown land of the rest of his expression, muscle cording in his arms in frustration.

"No," he says simply, weighing his next words. New territory for him, this whole actually confronting someone instead of implying - risky business, for observationally hateful people like Matthew. "But you could stop wasting your time on trying to make it different, connecting with people that don't appreciate how you think, that can't see past themselves. Tea and long walks aren't going to fix you. Religion, especially. You're not that kind of person."

Will feels his teeth, and the grit again from the tea. He also feels the soreness of his cheek, chewed over and over to hold his tongue. What a load of shit. (*What a load of things you're afraid of, locked in a closet and casually dragged out on occasion by people who think they know better than yourself.*)

"Do you really want to go there?" he asks.

Matthew shrugs, like he's made his point.

Will huffs incredulously at first, but soon resigned, resolved as tinder is to become flames. "You know what, let's go ahead. I'm an asshole, and a mess, but it could be worse. I could be you and think I'm not, or that no one can see it." Will replies quickly, and pushes forward even when he knows he'll regret it. "You're not much of a person at all. You just pretend to be one, and point fingers at dumb animals like you're not one too. You came here specifically to find something to talk about being superior to, when actually I think you were just hoping there would be something for you to watch."

Matthew laughs, more of a breath and a hiss, but a laugh at heart. "Gonna tell me I get off on watching people try to hide their depravity? That I'm a voyeur, or that I'm dangerous?"

"You're not as dangerous as you think you are," Will snorts. "You're as vulnerable as the rest of us. You just don't know what scares you yet."

"Whatever you say, Will," Matthew says, easing his arms back to fall to the mattress and stare at the ceiling with a smile. Smug. The guy at every debate class that thinks they got the better of you. "You're the one that's a perpetual victim going between people, hoping for someone to deal with it, not me."

The quiet that follows after that isn't awkward - just hot and searing, like an oven left on too long. Matthew's perfectly at ease, strike delivered and straight into something soft. Will finishes his drink, not really tasting it, only feeling the sharp pain in his eyes trying to slip away were it not for the angry squint of them, focused on a knot in the woodgrain of the floor.

(*He's not wrong. You just never hear it said so plainly. "I resemble that remark!" you yell behind your eyes, and hide somewhere in your father's arms, carried away from your grandparents' living room where the police are taking statements, and again in his own, police waiting on the other side of the door.*)

There's not much to do but crawl under the covers at that point. Will pointedly refuses to be the guy that insists on having the last word - it's even less appealing when it would just be vehement denial, and Will, as Hannibal says on the lakeside, is a sterling standard for truth. Matthew could be wrong, but he could also be right, and Will's not willing to put his own hypothesis forward on this. Point and match, better luck next time, Graham.

He hates staring into Matthew's side of the room in the navy-blue dark of the room when the lamp goes off, the distant sun over the trees never far off, but nature gets the better of logic, seething at him sleeping easily from across the space. How can he go to sleep so easily after that? Doesn't he hurt when someone calls him a beast the way it hurts Will?

Will watches, and agonizes, and withdraws into himself.

(*Is that what* ***everyone*** *thinks of you?*)

The tea fortunately does it's work. He sleeps, even if the pit of his stomach is roiling.

It's not a real place. Will knows it's not a real place because the trees have eyes where a birch should have knots, and he feels smaller than he should be, with that curious slow crawl of a run hiding in his legs that only dreaming has. Despite this unsettling detail, it is bright, the spaces between the white bark of the trunks voluminous and cathedral-like with a high ceiling of bright green leaves. In them, the rustling of feathers, striped and grey and matching the trees like they've been covered in hundreds of the birch eyes, creased closed.

Cu-coo, cu-coo, cu-coo.

Will blinks at the metal sight of a rifle, and smiles. He wanted to see him again, the cuckoo that's been absent from his oak tree.

There is nowhere for bad nights to lurk, or the heaving black hide of his increasingly constant companion to sink into the hollows of. However, the trunks of the trees are tightly packed - easy to see through, but only a few inches between each of their neighboring trunks. It is less the body of the stag that he sees as much as a barcode of where he should be, snout and legs and horns delivered in small slivers of data.

He is steadying his shoulder on the bark, beneath a pair of blue-green eyes knotted into the tree that are tired. Will is afraid he's going to miss his shot under their watch and contemplates asking them to close.

(*"Both eyes open," Beau says, lining up a shot for you. The barrel briefly has his weathered hand against it, a silver ring worn on the index finger tapping on the forestock because it doesn't fit on the ring finger anymore from swelling hands. "If y'miss y'can aim and shoot twice quickly if y'keep your eyes open."*)

A russet eye stares at Will between the hundreds of black and white ones glaring from the tree trunks. He takes aim.

Cu-coo, cu-coo.

Will pulls the trigger, and gasps, because the pain is immediate like he's shot at himself instead of the deer. Maybe it's the same, an essential thing roaming and sheltering things from his vision, but the answer is much simpler. The recoil of the gun brings the stock so hard down onto his boy-thin shoulder, he's certain if he looks at it, the bones will reach out around the wood to hold it in place of his arm. *Thank you* , he wants to tell them, all pearly and clean and blood neatly pooling near the skin, *I couldn't hold it without you,* but his mouth is sealed shut and his chest is burning with golden sunlight.

Will wakes to two long figures standing over him, and an ache in his throat that begs for water and air. The fog of the dream is heavy - it sticks to his ribs. He can't remember the last time he felt so out of breath. He coughs, but out the window he can still hear it in the early morning hours: *cu-coo, cu-coo, cu-coo, cu-coo.*

There's a moment that it takes his brain a second to amalgamate what he sees into something sensible. He confuses the figures for the shadow of his deer in the strange early unlight. It's a wall of muscle and fur, neck curved to face away from him, but gratefully whole and unmarred. *Good to see you* , he blinks and exhales, *I was afraid you were with me and I shot you.*

When the haze of sleep retreats further to stay on his pillow, WIll can see that's it's an entirely different thing in front of him - Hannibal dressed in a hunter's field coat and tall boots, laced tight and shiny, and Matthew, curled into the same leaning position of the hours before but trembling with tension, eyes dark and hidden in the twilight between the bed and the open doorway. His hands flex in the coverlet. The two of them face each other, but say nothing.

"Time to go then?" Will says hesitantly, coughing a little more.

Hannibal, as blank as Mischa had been, doesn't turn away, only glancing at him.

"Yes," he says lowly. "Time to go. I've brought you what you'll need, Will. As for Mr. Brown," he adds, "he'll be leaving this morning."

"What?" Both Will and Matthew bark. He can't see properly still, but Matthew seems surprised, taken aback.

Hannibal keeps his gaze locked to the other man in the room. "He will be at liberty to tell you the reason on his own time in the States, should you so choose to hear it. As it is, Mischa will see to it that he finds his way down the drive while we continue our day as planned."

Will pauses for what feels like several minutes, eyes cutting between them, and eventually nods. He turns on the lamp on the side table on with a twist - his phone shines up a bold 4:07

am. Seven minutes past when he expected Hannibal to wake him.

His throat is aching with every heartbeat and a shakiness in his arms that he's hoping fades as he gets ready, while cold burrows between vertebrae and joints. He graciously accepts a field coat of his own to hide in. It's just one day, he reminds himself. Over before lunch - hardly anything to ask from him in exchange for the stay at the house and the food, nevermind the grief counseling. Nevermind the reminders of what it's like to be cared for. He's painfully curious what has happened in the seven minutes he's been asleep, but the mood reads black and silent.

Matthew, who watches Will slip into his borrowed gear and boots, waits the span of a few heartbeats before standing resentfully to begin dressing as well. He laughs, looking between the two of them while Hannibal goes to the hall, but goes only far enough for privacy. Whatever passed between them before Will wakes, it will not be answered here.

"Good luck Will," says Matthew, when Will rises to leave, still laughing like he can't quite believe what's happening. "You're going to need it."

Will watches him for only a moment, rubbing at his neck and mouth, before turning away.

Will has just enough time to go to the bathroom and wipe his face with a soft cloth, before Hannibal is herding him down the hall, two rifles glinting from straps swung over his wide shoulder. He holds them like he disdains them - a tool, not an artist's favorite pencil, or a chef's favorite knife. He has one of those as well, sitting at his waist in a tidy black sheath, unremarkable save for the newness of it. The handle of the knife, wrapped in tanned leather, is well-worn and oil-blacked from hands.

Not all new, then.

Car trips often began in the early dawn hours growing up. Daddy throws the luggage in the back of an aging Ford Bronco with bad shocks, drinks the thin morning brew from the kitchen coffee maker, and herds Will into the front seat with the kind of benign resignation all

fathers must have about adolescent sons being difficult to wake. His excitement doesn't rouse Will - this isn't the way Will wants to spend his summer vacation, or weekend, or scant few days in the winter before he has to be back in the classroom, but he's going one way or another.

This has the same feeling, with thirty or so men and women milling about the back courtyard of the house, sipping gritty but strong coffee from tin cups, not quite awake enough to do much more than stand there, shuffling rifles between their shoulders. Will is surprised to see Tobias in their numbers, standing with Francis and Chiyoh, casting suspicious glances between the hunters. Will guesses he did mention wanting to see this - hard to scholastically spectate something that happens isolated in the woods.

Abigail is doing some milling herself, watching Tobias with a closed expression that flickers between him and Hannibal, awaiting instruction. (*Did she tell her host-father-preacher of the man in their midst spilling secrets? Or did they laugh that he had any secrets to reveal at all?*) Brian is absent. Beverly isn't much of a hunter, even if she is a fantastic shot. Matthew is apparently disinvited and going home, and doesn't have an opportunity to see it at all.

Will coughs, hand coming up to press between his chin and throat.

Hannibal turns to him, and probes the edges of his neck with careful hands. It hurts the same way it hurt when he woke up - Will almost steps away, confused, but it all starts to make some kind of sense when he considers causes, and in turn, bothers to look at the evidence.

He brings his own hands up, to the press of the hyoid, the thyroid cartilage, the sternohyoid, sternothyroid, a laundry list of delicate tissue holding his heavy head to his body -

(*From your textbook: the National Institutes of Health define strangulation injuries as a heterogeneous set of traumatic pathology that occurs as a result of mechanical force applied externally to the neck and surrounding structures. As a type of asphyxia, these injuries may result in decreased cerebral oxygen delivery either by compression of cervical blood vessels, or tracheal occlusion. Death rapidly ensues without the removal of compressing--*)

- and looks back up at the house, and the window where their room should be, still dark in the dawn hours. Will supposes that makes sense. All the pieces of his (neck) vision indicate there's a truth to that, and how he woke gasping just days before.

“You sleep quite deeply when you do,” Hannibal says without explanation. He doesn’t really need to. “You should be more mindful of who you bed down with, though I am sorry it happened at all. Did you suspect?”

He takes a moment to consider that, how much he can say without being presumptuous, or admit to his anger before and the implication that he’s a nuisance. Unknowable. Doomed to be misunderstood when he understands everything else so well. Will would like to say it’s a shock to be right again, but it’s not.

“Thank you,” Will says, rubbing his neck again, swallowing around the tightness there. “No, I didn’t. Not for me, anyway. Maybe someone else, someday down the road.”

(*Matthew’s uninvited because he hurt you. Commit that to memory. Don’t forget. That’s what you’ve been sleeping next to. That’s what happens when you’re ok with maybe-maybe-maybe, when you know exactly what you’re dealing with.*)

“Don’t thank me,” Hannibal replies. “Show me your keen vision instead.”

They go in groups of three, tying little bright red sashes at their arms in lieu of the flash orange that Will grows up seeing in ugly vests and hats - “Ten groups is rather more than I am comfortable without making a distinguishment,” Hannibal explains, tying Will’s like a tourniquet at his bicep. He can feel his blood pulse underneath it, and flexes the fingers of his left arm in response to each throbbing moment. “Wouldn’t want to accidentally hit someone thinking you’ve found a nice dinner. I am fond of a few too many people out this morning to risk returning to my trauma skills.”

Will is also given another cup of tea, which this time he is promised won’t have the narcotic effects. He refuses at first, but Mischa - awake and wide eyed in the pre-dawn, is very insistent.

“Just for the swelling,” says Mischa with a serious frown, going from group to group, offering blessings. Both her and Hannibal watch as he drinks it down in wincing gulps, wanting it over with. He has that sensation again, of his cooperation being measured. The drink is earthy this time - he really should ask what it is, but her attentiveness leaves him feeling self-conscious and ready to leave. It settles in the pit of his stomach, hot and pulsing. From across the stone terrace of the courtyard, Abigail watches too, with a gallows whiteness.

“There,” says Mischa, satisfied with the empty mug. “Better to hunt with a clear throat and a cool head. You’ll see and hear better this way.” With the sun beginning to blush the skyline, she looks like a wild rose in her ruddy skin, white dress and wild unbraided hair spreading to find the morning.

Hannibal says something to the crowd. Will thinks it’s probably important.

Will, however, is staring at his hands. They are warm still from the mug, or from the blood that is likely pooling in his neck, or they feel like they are. He’s not entirely sure, with a chill going down his spine that doesn’t match in timbre or temperature. His ears, however, are still working, and Hannibal has the kind of voice that suffers no lack of resonance to them. Will is driven to listen.

Hannibal, standing at the edge of the property before the company that is thirty men and women strong, seems to sense none of this for all that Will is practically in his back pocket, hands deep in the pockets of his borrowed coat (*charity case, the poor kid again*) and hesitant to be on his own. He looks taller in his field coat, his boots and gloves hiding the cleverness of his predator’s paws and his weapons natural and man-made.

“We start our spring and summer days providing for our home,” he says, loud and smooth. “Burying things in soil, burning them as fuel for a fire’s radiance...and what we receive in turn is provenance. Provenance over the fields, and the trees, and all the things that creep across them. What seeks shelter in them is ours to decide to be our bounty or our charge. Today,” he says, gesturing to the dark of the tree trunks, “we choose bounty.”

“Gera medžioklės,” he says with a smile. “Good hunting.”

He turns with ease, and Abigail and Will turn with him, caught in his gravity, and all the others disperse to their own paths. No drinks other than the warm ones waiting for the company to assemble, and no words more specific. Their little red sashes disappear into the cover of the leaves.

They take the path to the north, the same space where Hannibal walked Will over logs and low brackish walkways to avoid the white lily flowers and to avoid the company of other people from the lake. (*"It was a habit of the Baltic tribes to submerge stones and logs into the bogs to make walkways," Hannibal explains, a hand aloft and waving like you should know this. Maybe you should. "If you didn't know where they were, you didn't know where to walk. These mires are not so deep as that, but I like the impression of sieges," he adds with a grin, boots shaking the timber of a felled pine log, in others submerged to the ankle. You and Abigail trace his steps the way that cartoons draw characters sneaking, tall steps, high and hesitant feet.*) Groups of three break off from them in turns, quiet and unremarked on. If there are rules, they are discussed in other circles than the ones Will is familiar with.

Tobias walks with Chiyoh and a serious faced Francis, the man who drives him, Freddie, and Brian to the manor. He doesn't really try to talk, save some small comments between him and Hannibal that Will doesn't catch between confusion about which path they divert to, and Abigail's occasional gesture to follow. Chiyoh shows no particular regard for her companions, but Will can see that it would make sense to put another outsider with someone already familiar. Tobias certainly looks uncomfortable with his gun, though maybe less so with a practical pen knife he keeps in his front pocket.

The lilies pass, as do more ferns, and forks and forks and forks of boggy paths and animal trails. Will doesn't track the time, and no one goes out of their way to do so either. Chiyoh gives them the scantest of glances before disappearing to the west.

Soon, it is only them, the other hunting parties that came in the same direction as them disappearing into quiet stands of pine and black alder, casting their sticky catkins to the dark forest floor. Abigail is a quiet companion, minding her steps and avoiding the thick mud of the trail with ease. She keeps a few measured steps behind Hannibal, like she's afraid to disturb the eddies of his air. It feels like they walk for hours, but Will is suspicious this is more because he feels the grove widen at the edges of his eyes, like he's only gliding along, listening for leaves rustling a glade away.

His head is hurting again, but his eyes and throat are clear and comfortable as Mischa promised, and there's nothing of the confusion of the morning's start keeping him from putting one foot in front of the other, staring into the spaces between tree trunks. He feels afloat. He can sense the branches overhead the way people near you in a crowd are felt, brushing the edges of his space, but Will doesn't see eyes in the knots and burls the way he does at night - not yet anyway.

(*Every living being averting their eyes to your irresponsible stewardship. This time you'll be ready.*)

Someone occasionally redirects him to the right path. Someone occasionally passes a hand at his waist, trim and tapered from the field coat. "This way," comes the quiet whisper. "Our quarry should be this way."

Abigail never disagrees - just presses on, fingers whitening on the stock of her rifle. Performance anxiety. Will wants to tell her it's ok, but his tongue is cleaved to the top of his mouth and he is equally as white fingered with balled fists, feeling the glide of wet tissue, teeth, saliva - everything here, but not truly present unless he touches it.

Will blinks, pinching at the red hem of his armband, and considers; what the fuck was in the tea this time?

It's in another quiet and half-lit clearing in the trees where Hannibal calls them to stop, hand up and listening. He closes his eyes and breathes in deeply.

Will closes his eyes too, seasick on land. There's the occasional undulation of the ground in little hills, carved by flowing water and the shoots of trees starting to rise where the sun can reach them. What little can be seen of the sky is rosy and brightening. A good place to find wild boar as any, with plenty of places to bed down. If they hunt half as often as Will thinks and the shirking of hunting licenses suggests, Hannibal and the people who live on the Lecters' property must know every bolthole and glade that an animal would call home.

"Don't need dogs when you go with Hannibal," Abigail says in a breathless whisper. "He's told me where a mink had been through by the smell alone."

“Must be rough teaching college students on warm days,” Will replies, wanting to laugh, knowing he shouldn’t. Hannibal the bloodhound. Hannibal the night creature. (*“Your distress is attractive,” says Mischa, like that’s normal, expected, and approved.*) He’s having a hard time sorting his thoughts, with the gentle wave of the ground, and his warm hands, and cold neck.

“Eminently,” Hannibal adds, bringing his hand back down and pulling the rifles from his shoulder to hand one to Will, and check the stock of his own. Will takes it, and feels the amusement dissolve into anxiety again, breathing with the breeze. “Our courses separate here - if we don’t wish to give chase for the rest of the day that is. Will - you head further north, through the path there. I will go to the west towards the lakes, and Abigail to the east towards the road. Mind that you stay north of the bend - someone might come through with one of the cars to head to town.”

Abigail nods, swallowing away her hesitation and pallor. She goes easily and confident, a slip of a girl with her braid swinging behind her one moment, and gone behind a currant bush the next.

“What do you want me to do if I see a boar?” asks Will, shuffling on his feet. When he looks at them, the ground moves like a puddle, rippling out from the toes of his boots. He shakes his head, and it’s again normal, head beginning to pulse.

Hannibal smiles, secretive: “Shoot, hopefully. Turn it west if you need help,” he adds. “No sense in letting it run you out of range. I will come find you if I hear a shot, as will Abigail.”

And like that’s easy, and this isn’t a forest he’s never spent any great amount of time, and that Will isn’t sure if he can feel his hands even if he can feel each shard of light like it’s Hannibal’s well-worn knife to his eyes, Hannibal turns, crosses the squelching wet moss and underbrush, and disappears into the darker part of the woods. He is alone, perhaps the most completely he has been since coming here, with nothing but the long-turned away limbs of the trees above to keep him company.

He sets his course north, and the peace he felt in the company of the others disappears with their red sashed arms.

This was supposed to be a group activity. That's how he walks himself through the obligation the night before at dinner, and the droning idea of being given a firearm that is getting louder and more raucous, like the engine of the plane that flies over the Atlantic is now in his head.

It's substantially less complicated to understand than Alana, or the GWU counselor, or even someone like Hannibal or Mischa would think - Will doesn't want to be confronted with the image of choosing again if something dies slow or quick, but he doesn't say so, and now he's here.

Wherever that is, he thinks, stepping over another felled log, sloping downwards into the drainage of two hills.

Will is practical. He tries to think in terms of what he knows, edging around unripe blueberry and heather in the scant clearings. He's not hunted this kind of game before, but profiling doesn't imply a need to do violence in every flavor to understand it - so too can he make his guesses at this. Boars are less seen, and more heard or smelt. By Abigail's consideration, Hannibal should be the one taking the lead on this. They live in furrows, and eat whatever suits them. They stick to brush. They typically stay in groups. They take a few shots to kill, run quick, scream loud.

Pigs are the most human animal after all.

Whatever gliding peace he is afforded by the drink this morning has gone at that thought - he is now invariably gliding the way one does in pursuit during sleep, legs pumping and lungs struggling, but naught but the walking speed of a person ambling to show for it. Will insists he's fine. He checks his pockets for bullets, and loads one with the bolt. He breathes through his nose, and hisses air out from his teeth.

In spite of the humidity and the rising sun, Will's drink-warm, flexing hands sit on the trigger guard in an angled downward hold, but shy of the trigger itself.

(*"Y'gotta think clearer than what y'shootin'," says Beau, adjusting your form, moving your spine and your shoulders the way you move a brick or a hammer. Not affectionate, full of intention all the same. You prefer the hands you feel these new summer days instead. You feel guilty for thinking it.*)

When he reaches the murky water sitting stagnant between hills, there is a dance of flies and mosquitos on the glassy surface. So too is there a gathering of more currants and grey willow, hiding the western view of the forest. That's ok though - he doesn't need to see any further to see the rustling in the branches, too violent for a bird or something small.

Will brings his gun up, heart in his throat. It hurts so much for it to be there. Either of them. Any of them. Pulsing against his neck.

(*"Aim center, a bit high. Hit som'thin' important. Y'don't wanna haf'ta run after it. Y'want to hit well 'nough to leave blood t'follow," says Beau.*)

There's the shadow of it, close to the ground. It stops rustling the branches. It waits for Will, or whatever it hears. Will doesn't smell it but he senses its acrid suspicion, not yet turned to fear. Trigger finger moves from the guard, and the bolt is already loaded and locked. The sun in the trees is the tinsel tips of a fake fir. The light is the strand of bulbs, too big for where they're strung.

He hesitates for a moment - does he even know if that's a boar?

Will pulls his fingers away from the guard to the trigger with eyes open, sight focused over the top of a leaf gone yellow with transparency, where his target crouches - he watches for more rustling, watches for young or fellows bedded down in the creek, but sees none. Not the hallmarks of what he thinks he should be looking for. Hannibal wants him to shoot...would he be upset if Will shot a deer, or a badger instead?

(*"What do you think?" asks Hannibal, and you both know the answer.*)

In for a penny, in for a pound. He pulls the trigger.

The first shot he takes is a bad one - Will knows it is the second he feels his left eye close, and the dappled light of the canopy changes patterns on the forest floor and the water's rippling surface. He takes the shot anyway because he feels that he needs to. There's nothing

suggesting he'll get another chance with so many churning up the quiet of the grove and surrounding forests. There's nothing to suggest the other parties won't split up too, and Will wants to do *something* right.

The rifle rings in his ear, pressing the joint of his shoulder the way a car accident jolts the body. It's not foreign feeling - he grew up with it. He dreamt it last night. He's imagined it a hundred times since December. The bullet hits with the sinking, fleshy sound of knife to loin and a high pained sound. The leaves rustle - the boar runs to the west, crouched low and all fours scrambling over stones, and Will gives chase with a shaky breath.

The water splashes with each heavy step, Will panting and slipping on the mossy rocks and grass as he follows the slope of the hill and the heavy torn up treads of his quarry. The smell of pine and decay is intense, and the occasional tacky splash of blood. It's motor oil dark, dragging the curling fronds of fern and peat down with it. There's no sign other than that of what he strikes, though for a moment he thinks he catches the sight of a shining white limb, and the turn of a head.

A person , comes the thought. But no - no red sash. Will rubs his eyes against the glare of the risen sun, pushing hair off a damp forehead. The distraction is enough to miss the root of a tree, reaching up for him, and he falls into the debris of the ground, boot landing deep and wet into another shallow bog.

He turns his head, ear half wet, wincing at the unexpected iciness of the water. It's not the lukewarm rain puddle of Sandusky. There's no one sitting in it with him, and Will's not sure if he's mistaken a boar for another animal.

No , comes the next thought, which sits terror-filled in his mouth. *It could be my friend. My stag.*

This however doesn't come to pass. The thought of its steaming breath and high, high antlers is enough to call it, like it does in every dream. The blackness of a thicket of trees becomes the lean animal, towering over Will. It bends it's noble head, breathing its smoky white in swirling curls of heat. It's the closest they've been since the first time Will catches sight of it from the ugly doublewide's carpet. It's as inky and tar-dark as the trail.

Will hesitates to grab an antler, for all that it's shoved in his space the way the rifle was shoved in his hand, now splayed on the ground, chamber empty. But he does.

It too is hot, the way that a car engine warms the hood - it's less sharp than he expects, still in summer velvet, tips whitening where it will eventually fall away. Clean, not necrotic, not bloody with the coming shed. There's a moment where he simply stares up into the creature's face, following the sclera and maroon of the limbic ring of its eye. The wide head of it nods, black and shiny in the shadows to match the tar-colored path of blood.

The deer is safe, and he's with me, and he knows me , comes the third thought. Will hasn't shot it. He's shot something else - and so too must that animal in the thick of the forest running away be what needs to do right by. He reaches for the gun, and rises on his knees, smoky peat from the ground in his mouth with the same smoky breath as the stag.

(*"Right now, you are exactly where you are meant to be."*)

Will turns with a nod, and runs.

There's still the wild thrashing of brush which he run towards, gone dim but growing louder as he thunders through the underbrush, broken branches and clods of mud thrown by the boar in haste to escape. Will pants and uses trembling fingers to reload the chamber, the *snick-click* of the bolt pushing the bullet into position sounding like sliding a door lock closed before bed. There's more sound the closer he gets, the desperate panting of something trying to catch their breath. He thinks it might be him, but everything feels like him, from the tree he catches his shoulder on to the laces of his wet boot, loosening. They're not very new-looking any more, dotted the same way Hannibal's are in the park, in the grove, at the lakeside.

When he comes to another clearing, Will stops - the boar is hunched over at the edge of a stand of sapling trees, clutching at the dirt.

Will frowns. Clutching. Clutching is for fingers. Clutching is for pink nails in his hair, or hugs that start at the neck, the most vulnerable space on him. (*Things keep trying to hurt you there.*) Clutching is for bowing heads in the bathtub, and waiting for the pressure in your head to subside and for people to stop looking at you.

It's clutching because it's Matthew, and he is bleeding from a grievous side wound.

"Right there," comes the sigh in his ear again, the cloudy ring of breath hot and fragrant with pine, mint, the leather of gloves, the viscous perfume of blood. The stag again, always not far from the wreckage or from the woods. "Take your aim right there."

Will looks again into the clearing. It's Matthew, it's not Matthew. There's a boar, but there's also a man. He can't wipe the sweat from his eyes to be sure - he needs both eyes open in case he has to lock the bolt a second time in succession. He should have prepared better the first time. Will knows he's not well - there's no chance it's anything other than the boar he was tracking. It makes no sense for it to be anything else.

(*Mischa is taking Matthew to town. Hannibal is taking you hunting, and he has chosen a path for you to follow that will lead you to the right prey.*)

"Right there," comes the refrain, combing curls at his temples. The ache recedes with each rake of horns (*fingers*) across them.

So Will does. He takes aim.

The stock of the rifle is narrow despite the larger gauge for bigger game, nestled as a bone in the crook of his shoulder and shiny from careful polishing. It's handsome, with silvery flowers carved into the receiver, the bolt sticking out the top as proud as any cross, even the one nearest to the oak. It's the kind of thing you inherit. (*You are not an inheritor. You're a poor Southern son.*) He stares it down, and the shadowy boar rustling in the foliage, and locks the bolt, bullet settling in place as a person bedding down for the night, ready to sleep.

It fires easily, loud enough to wake up someone down the hall.

As it is, it's enough to erupt into the long cry of a creature injured. This is where Will freezes - he's shot the animal, now he's supposed to finish the job, isn't that what he was supposed to

do before? He only needs to walk forward over the high grass and shallow bogs between the trees here on the north end of the woods, and ensure a quick death.

In his not-new-but-new work boots, in a borrowed green jacket, with his borrowed rifle that is not a cheap Remington made for small game birds and shooting cans but a pretty thing, Will shivers with chills, and watches his great black deer cross in front of him, catching the barrel with its eyeguards. The metal grinds against the horns. He hears each burr at the base of the antlers scrape at the gun, and he feels it in his own head like a nail for each bump, driven up underneath the scalp.

“I need to shoot again,” Will says quietly. “It’s the kind thing to do,” he tries to explain.

He stares, until he’s really not looking at anything - just an empty space in the forest, with the thrashed ground of where he’s shot his boar.

(*You’ve waited too long.*)

That’s how Hannibal and Abigail find him, staring at a space where there’s no deer, and beyond in the treeline, there’s no longer a boar, just broken branches and churned up mud of something mad and pained trying to get away from everything around it. The gun lays on the ground forgotten, and his hands are bloodied from his tracking path and from long gouges from falling.

(*You said next time you saw this you’d shoot again. 11 extra minutes to die - your fault again. Maybe if your aim was better, or your gun was bigger, or you could look in a straight line without your eyes aching like someone is jabbing fingers into their corners to examine them and pull them close like jewels, you could have shot again, you could have-*)

“I think I missed,” Will whispers, wiping the sweat off the side of his face, sick at the idea of an incomplete kill. That’s the thing they teach you first - only shoot if you think it’s something you can get dealt with. You don’t want to give chase. Respect the animal. Be a good steward of the earth, as God intended, you stupid hick boy. There’s a guilt bubbling in his gut that makes him want to drag his feet through ferns and low-hanging spruce branches and the bulk of willow and blueberry bushes to finish the job. His mouth is watering with bile.

Hannibal, wiping blood from his mouth, brings a hand to clasp at his shoulder and his neck, pulling him in close to embrace. He is smiling. He is so pleased.

“You didn’t,” he says.

Will thinks Hannibal checks his watch, fingertip at Will’s collarbone, tapping a staccato with his heartbeat. He pulls it up to his cheek, fingers catching snarled curls at the temples. Checking Will’s pulse and his temperature.

From behind Hannibal’s shoulder, Abigail holds her rifle at an angle again, little white fingers tight over the safety and the barrel. She too gives Will a smile, though hers is watery and uncertain. It’s her first hunt like this too, Will remembers. It’s only right that it’s a disaster, because Will is different these days in all but one way: poor aim is a family trait.

Hannibal’s hand cups the soreness of Will’s neck, and Will thinks it fits so nice, covering every hurt until he doesn’t think about it anymore.

pass by the door - 'tis seldom shut

Chapter Notes

Additional warning for this chapter: briefly implied sibling incest.

It takes a few minutes for things to calm down.

No, that's not entirely it. It takes a few minutes for *Will* to calm down. He is above the ground, he is floating from the grass to the mid-morning canopy of leaves, and it's only because there's hands at his shoulders and neck that he doesn't just continue upwards and past the blue of the sky. It's novel, really - gravity has tried to keep him down in the blood-iron of the earth for six months now, and instead he could be a balloon with cut strings right now, disappearing.

He has to repeat to himself *this is ok, this is ok* when the gun is gently pried from his hands, and his hands are turned over to look at the small cuts and scrapes that falling into the trees and thorny brush around him write into his knuckles. Hannibal speaks low, grabbing from the depths of his own field coat's deep pockets a handkerchief. He might be talking to Will. He might not - Abigail's here too he supposes. Will stares instead at his waist, and the brass buttons at the top of each pocket, and the glinting fresh leather of the holster, as he did this morning.

No blade in the sheath. Hannibal has lost his knife, Will thinks when he sees the holster. He should tell him.

Looking up at Hannibal, he's surprised to see the other man sporting a wild bruise of his own just beneath the eye, and a fat lip that has split to bleed. His ruddy red eyes, normally a low ember, are so bright and excited, pulse ticking in his neck from running. Will imagines he must have gone a great distance tracking his prey, and it's only poor luck that he's not

dragging a boar of his own behind him now. He must have lost his game to find Will, sprinting down familiar trails.

(*You can see better now his irreverence for hunting as a convention of government, instead of a right of man. The forest and the gods provide the game, the hunter provides the worship and the bounty to the table. What officials of small laws dare come between them?*)

He's always so polished, even now in his handsomely fitted coat and the aberration of his small wounds. It's a different facet to see him not perfect in his words and bearing and impenetrable calm even in the face of Will's weirdness. Will feels an absolute ruin next to him, even with the split lip, even with the growing blackness under his red eye.

Hannibal must sense this, even as he doesn't stop digging at torn skin with the handkerchief, removing the worst of the debris in Will's hand.

"I got a bit ahead of myself," he explains. "Took a rather strong knock to the face in my own pursuit after I heard your shot. It seems the two of us must share a little blood for our blood today," he says with a grin, the white of his teeth bloodied at the gums.

(*Beau's tongue sliding between his perfect teeth, splatter at the gum line from the wound - damned if you do, damned if you don't, right Will? That's what you thought about. That's what sticks when thrown at that wall of what the last gunshot you heard before today was. Hannibal's are perfect too, and he cleans them with a rough lick and a smile, not at all bothered by the taste.*)

"We'll have to thank the other parties for the bulk of our supper tonight," he adds. "I think yours has gone and run himself to the edges. I'll have another look when it gets later - there's enough blood on the leaves to make me think he'll wear himself out soon enough. Perhaps Chiyoh can assist in the search." *Him*, he keeps saying. The certainty of *him.*

"I'm sorry you missed yours," Will says quietly.

"I didn't," corrects Hannibal, still dabbing at the knuckles, an echo of minutes before. Will wonders at that too.

It’s a long walk back, dodging the little white lilies and their spade leaves, blooming rain-cold and rose fresh in his nose when the smell of accelerant from the bullets disappear. Will can’t even say for sure he understands where they’re going other than southward, only that Abigail is quiet and walks ahead of them, a rifle slung to either shoulder. Hannibal, in turn, walks Will back with careful hands and a relaxed smile, telling him he’s done well, everyone occasionally misses the one-shot kill, the animal won’t suffer long or be left to rot. Waste not, want not, Will had thought just last night, listening to Abigail describe Hannibal’s desire to use everything edible.

As it was before the sun comes up, the parties slowly flow back into each other, as streams meet a river. Some carry the full carcasses of boar's between each other, sheepskin gloves clenched hard around cloven feet. Will tries not to stare at them too long, or how the sun reflects on the dark bristly hair, and their long mouths hang open and red. It's not safe for his mind to wander anymore than it has, and Will doesn’t think he has it in him anyway. He feels thin and mean and tired, like he could sit under any of these trees and just sleep for the next hundred years. Rip Van Winkle, gone twenty years, and on waking, everything he’s known is gone after a war.

Mischa welcomes everyone in the noonday light, in the same fashion as the first day with washing hands and soft cloths, and a far darker mead served in a silver cup. He's still working his way through the last one. In the absence of Abigail as her assistant, she instead has Alana. A puzzling addition but appropriate somehow, who smiles at first when Will approaches, but frowns when she sees what Will knows what must be a mess. Will almost immediately declines it, even before he's offered a sip - he's had quite enough today of unnamed drinks.

An assessment of his person: jeans grass and moss stained from the fall, the speckling of dirt and debris poorly wiped from them. Hair is snarls and tangles, a rose bush, a berry vine. Right hand reddened from bracing himself against gravity that works regardless of how he’s been gliding his way through the morning walk. Left hand trembling from holding the gun muzzle aloft. Head hurts, eyes *burn-burn-burn* .

“Was it a rough morning?” asks Mischa, as golden as ever, but looking at Hannibal’s bruised face with a speculative eye. The water from her pitcher runs overlong and splashes the hem of her own dress, but she doesn’t pay it any mind. “Or a very good one?”

Will doesn't really reply, feet no longer gliding along, heartbeat in every toe.

(*"Nothing to fret over." Hannibal blithely tells you Chiyoh and Francis have agreed to take care of finding your boar,. "They're already tending to mine - but pay that no mind, they are happy to help," he explains when you ask if you should go back and not leave the hard work to someone else. It brings to mind the ranch guides of your youth, so deft with a skinning knife and hanging meat that gangly 13-year old you is more in the way than of assistance. You feel a little of that in the few times you've spoken with the gamekeeper - you want to prove her wrong.*)

(*What are you proving wrong, really? That you didn't accidentally kill a man? Surely not. Your head hurts too much to put that idea together - your head hurts* ***too much*** *--)*

Hannibal wrings his hands and stares between the water, and the fabric, and the small snake carved into the step leading back into the manor. Will knows higher up, another snake is coiled in ink in the shelter of Hannibal's elbow. Dorsal and cephalic veins pulse beneath the skin, knuckles tighten, redness starts to dissipate from the nail beds.

" *Labai geras* ," he says, secretive once more.

Mischa nods. " *Malonu girdėti* ," she replies, and smiles.

Will doesn't ask about that - their satisfaction. It makes his stomach turn, being out of the loop when he prides himself on knowing things, but the sunlight on the water and the weight of Mischa's gaze is burdensome instead of merely embarrassing, like she can guess at his chaotic thoughts. Hannibal wants him to go inside and rest.

Will just washes his hands, Alana looking on with some confusion herself. It's a comfort to know she's just as puzzled by them as he is, even when she knows some of the words to sing along with.

He’s put to bed not dissimilarly from a child, drinking more of that peppery sourness that is added to his drink from the night before - “I’d rather not,” he says insistently at first, wiping at his face. It still feels grimy, as though he's only just now fallen to the forest floor. “I don’t think the one from this morning sat right,” he adds, avoidant of describing trees breathing beside him, grasses rising up through his levitating feet. That sounds crazy, that sounds like something someone who’s not all there says they see.

(*“I’m worried about you, Will,” says the university counselor, and you rush from the office, because you’re not schizophrenic, you’re not fragmenting, you just don’t understand why your father killed himself when you were wrapped up in an afghan a decade older than you on Christmas Eve, like there was something you didn’t do or didn’t understand, when you’re the person who’s supposed to understand everything.*)

“It’s not the same as this morning,” Hannibal explains, imminently reasonable as he always is. The wildness in his eyes out in the woods has retreated and been stitched back into a smooth smile, dabbed at the edges with a clear paste where the lip is torn. He is steeping leaves in a tea strainer with the same disregard as chefs with their spices, or tradesmen with their tools. Will admits to a certain amount of relief that it’s Hannibal this time, rather than the lady of the house. “Mischa thought you needed something for your anxiousness as well as your aches, but the tracking took an adventurous turn, and you were quite anxious all the same...I understand your hesitation.”

He pushes a steaming mug at Will across the expanse of the kitchen island, leaning into it. “Once more,” he says. “Nothing to ease your stress, just your aches, doctor's order," he adds as a tease. "If it doesn’t do the job, I can certainly dig out some aspirin or paracetamol, though you’ll find the willow bark and yarrow is more or less the same.”

Will stares the mug down. “Is that what it is? Willow bark? Not very medically progressive of you,” he mutters, palming the sides of the earthenware mug. It is varnished, a pretty green with carefullly painted wheels and vines, but unglazed at it's core where the clay is orange-red and the tea honey-brown.

“Certainly some of it,” Hannibal half-shrugs, but watches his still with a wry look. “Though I will say, Will, that anyone accusing me of being progressive has direly misunderstood my opinion on most things.”

"Just a country boy at heart?" Will replies, turning the cup, over and over again in hand.

"Just myself," Hannibal says, clear eyed and smiling placidly. "I am what I always was going to be."

Fair enough, Will thinks. He drinks the tea, because there's no reason not to, if it's the same as last night. If it's not, he waits out the world growing into his limbs, as one waits out any other hangover. The promise of some old fashioned pain killers offered if it doesn't work is enough to surmount the hesitation - he can't see past the glare of pain behind each eye, and needing some seems imminently probable. There's something waiting to grow behind them, like raising the gun had planted a seed there, and it's germinating in the heat of his forehead. Maybe he's rooted in place like a tree himself, cozy in the shade of greater trunks, awaiting the open sky of winter when the leaves fall away. Willow bark is brethren in this way, and it's skin will try to make him well.

But of course it does work, because the Lecters aren't troubled by the possibility of failure. Hannibal adds a spoonful of honey from a jar in the pantry, a perfect match, putting it away with a flourish of the lid and a jaunty step that doesn't suggest the pain of a hard run through the woods or a knock to the side of the head. Some people have all the luck, Will supposes with a frown. Hannibal closes the pantry door behind him with a quiet click, the work of others from the outside hidden by the burled wood and brass there.

Will mellows quickly not long after, barely keeping his eyes open from the bottom of the stairwell to the second floor. It's only with Hannibal's help that he's able to make it to the bunk room which has been cleaned and remade for the day. The second bed is empty.

(*You feel a flash of guilt at that - for the emptiness, and the relief that it's empty.*)

His boots and coat are shucked off his body by Hannibal who has the impartial speed and precision he'd expect from a previous ER doctor, but who lifts the covers and lays him on his side like something that needs careful handling. The sensation isn't terribly far off from being carried from the car to the house as a child, though never has he before had the experience of someone in his head saying "You'll feel better in a couple hours." "Let me mind the details." "You understood exactly what you were meant to do."

(*This one you don't understand at all. You almost open your mouth to say as much, but Hannibal's hand comes up to close it again, while you watch the flex of that tattooed crescent in the nook of his hand again for another of several uncountable times, thumb catching on the corner of your mouth to drag the meat of your lip as one favors the texture of a rose petal on an open bloom.*)

Will sighs, tired. He feels it reflected back to him from the skin of Hannibal's fingers.

(*You don't have the presence of mind to think about that. Presence to think of everything else, but not that. If you think about it, you have to be critical of it, and right now it's nicer to just let it happen as natural phenomena do - polar lights, summer thunderstorms, sea currents, someone's undivided attention.*)

Closing his eyes is easier. He doesn't dream. He's not sure he breathes either, maybe just finally coming to lay somewhere and quietly die the way he's contemplated what that would be like. It makes sense that someone like Hannibal or Mischa delivering it would make certain it's gentle and removed from other people - they keep to themselves. They keep what they like to themselves, like this house, like these people.

Will wakes at one point, feeling watery and half-lost in the amber light of the bedroom. The bed across from him is clean and tidy, but the door is thrown open, Beverly crouched before him where Hannibal had been what feels like only moments ago. There's an anxious look in her face, and she says something, but it's all just underwater to him, barely even words at all.

"They make the drinks wicked strong here," he thinks he says, and laughs with half a breath. He wishes she'd go away. He feels guilty that he wishes that, and still waits for her to go anyway.

He closes his eyes again briefly. He thinks he sleeps again, and wakes when the light from the windows has gone orange with sunset and a hand is pressing against his shoulder. He mumbles "a few more minutes" the way he always does to Beverly when she thinks he'll be late for class. She never tries more than once.

It’s not Beverly this time, but Alana. Will manages to stay awake this time, with that restful snowed-in feeling buzzing in his bones, and the light in the room gone darker than before, more orange than yellow.

Will has the particular tackiness to his skin that demands a shower after hard work. He doesn’t really remember sweating, not more since this morning, but by the tin-metal smell of himself and that same considering look Alana gives him at the front door, he must have.

Oh yes, he thinks, eyes laying on the blue of her fingernails, starting to chip four days into their stay. She hasn’t had time to re-do them. Will’s hardly seen her for all the time she spends with everyone but her friends.

“They told me to come get you,” Alana is saying, Margot over her shoulder, the press of her belly and breasts to the back of Alana’s shoulder. It should be awkward, the way they break into each other’s space, but it isn’t. They are two pieces of a complimentary puzzle, a Renaissance painting in their frocks, pink cheeked in the afternoon. He never thinks to ask where the two of them are now, during the day - the answer is together. They’ve all half-heartedly joked back at home she belonged somewhere like this, if only someone could challenge her clever mind.

(*You thought you would, before you realized the gaps there, even before Daddy and selling the house, and ruining a few family holidays for more than just you. Now you realize you need someone that can challenge* ***you*** *, and take your coarse disposition and name it as something that belongs to them, that they’ll collect like precious stones.*)

“Got lots to tell me about your day?” he asks, something between them in the time before either of them grow skeptical of each other that he can think of fondly between the fuzziness of sleep and waking. Minor complaints about teachers are common. So is teasing at the normalcy of cooking at home, after work hi-how-are-yous, walking in the rain. Commiserating over bottled beers and a bag of fried potato skins about Chilton discussing Lovecraft and Stapledon with none of the finesse to communicate what those minds were trying to say.

Will guesses they never really discussed anything personal. Not really. How did he not see that?

“You could probably use a catch up,” she blushes when she leans back into the warmth behind her. Like she’s always been doing it, or just waiting.

Alana wanted to have an experience, or so she said in the car on the way to the airport. She wanted to see. Will supposes she *can* see what it was she was looking for now.

Margot, umber-gold in the honeycomb window, considers her with clutching fingers in Will’s vision. That feels right, even if Margot’s fingernails are bare and flesh-pink, chewed back in nervous habits instead of smoothly varnished and cheerfully blue. It’s the first imperfection he can say he’s seen in her, other than the question of her burgeoning motherhood, and Brian’s tenuous jabs at her presence here. It’s a good thing, those little nibbles at the edges of her thin fingers, human, feminine.

(*It’s not that you needed to be a jock, or a academic fellow, or the pinnacle of mental health, or any middle-class man other than yourself to snare Alana - you just needed to be this other woman half a globe away instead, and that was always going to be beyond you. You are relieved of the burden of considering Alana at all. It’s almost liberating, not worrying what she thinks anymore.*)

“You were meant to find each other,” he mumbles, and raises a hand to wipe the corners of his eyes, his nose, his mouth that burns with the sandpapery chafe of (*someone else’s*) five o’clock shadow. He has a razor in his bag - he should freshen up. “I hope I did something to make it happen.”

“No,” says Margot, smiling now while Alana looks on with a girl’s tentativeness. Like Hannibal, like Mischa, she is confident in what she wants and her expression of it, tempered as it is by reserve. “But now that you’ve said it, I hope that’s true.”

Will almost asks if he can skip dinner. He’s feeling better than this morning, but he has the same weary hesitation of someone that's watching the hours of their Sunday sink away into the troubles of the coming work week. He wants to rewind time - maybe decline to go out this morning, or wake up and defend himself from the wiry hands of a person he didn’t really trust, but certainly never needed defending from.

(*You stop in the bathroom, wash your face, comb your hair, fret that you don't have a collared shirt to turn the collar up on - the growing red-purple-blackness of your neck is a bird in flight, each finger a feather. It's much broader than you thought Matthew was capable of, long fingered and sinewy. You were able to ignore the vastness as something contingent on your headache up until you see it. You don't cough - you want to though, to startle it off your neck and into the nearest tree. Maybe it's too large to scare, you think, and swallow.*)

But Will is hungry, and he doesn't want to leave his own boar meat hanging uneaten, while Francis and Chiyoh have worked hard for him while he recovers from his fall and his panic in the forest. They labor in the hollows of the cold storage cellar, and he certainly doesn't want to be rude. Doctor Hannibal Lecter's a stickler for courtesy, or so he heard what feels a million years ago. What kind of rude would it be to skip out after everything today?

Brian and Beverly keep to themselves, whispering between each other, though Beverly throws a glance at Will that suggests suspicion that he doesn't wholly understand. (*Yes, you do. You just don't know how* ***they*** *could.*) Alana asks if they should greet them, and Margot keeps her round mouth tight and closed. "Bothered by people being asked to leave," Alana says with a tight humourless smile. "There was an argument after Matthew left this morning. Guess they should just count themselves lucky it wasn't them."

Will rubs his neck, and thanks the tall collar of the field coat from the morning and the evening's growing shadows for hiding it safely. He hasn't decided how to feel about that, even without the pressure of outside scrutiny. He doesn't miss Matthew. He hasn't decided how to feel about that either.

Hannibal stops them before they head back outside tonight, now returned to the front drive of the manor to greet the moon rising in the east, with what Margot explains is Mercury, Venus, and Jupiter shining like pearls in the dark. Their divine feasting guests, riding out from the dark of the sky for a conjunction with the solstice.

"It was explained to me as being the Sun's daughters, which honestly, I'm all for the predominantly female pantheon that's celebrated here," Margot says with her usual frankness, smiling arm in arm with Alana.

“Women do typically handle the day-to-day better,” Hannibal slides in, comfortable in his white button-up shirt and waistcoat that flirts with old fashioned but reads as academic. So not the medieval tortures of spun cloth like his sister and the other adherents tonight, with unknowable patterns in praise of the past. Next to Alana and Margot’s long dresses, he’s almost entirely normal. Will thinks he does it on purpose, like it throws off the scent of their weirdness.

Wyrd, the thread of personal fate - he’s seen it written like that in a literature class in undergraduate: *that will be ere the set of sun* .

Hannibal continues, unaware of the scrutiny, if he’s ever aware of scrutiny at all. “Less war, more protection and purpose. I’m certain early man sloughing their way through the Ice Age melt would have appreciated the sacred feminine and the rare sign of renewal. The decision to exclude some of the other figures in the mythos is before my time.”

“Not much use for axe-wagging thunder gods at the Lecter house,” she deadpans, and lifts her face in a sly look while Alana’s glows with amusement.

“We honor that which we have always honored - the sun and moon. Lithuanians are not as the ancient Romans. We do not need statue after statue of gods we do not follow to send our prayers up to, just to make sure our ‘bases are covered’,” he explains, hands casual in the pockets of his trousers. “Though on the subject of sending up prayers - I need to borrow Will for a moment. My sister has need of him for a few moments’ time.”

Will turns to follow, only to be pushed along softly.

It’s the usual warm hands, though they press more firmly this time and present in the meat of his back and his shoulder, walking ahead of Hannibal to Mischa who is walking out the side door of the pantry and cellar. It's a black mouth behind her, unlit, but she navigates easily out, clearing the frame in all her vermillion finery, holding the now familiar linen wrapped package that Will has seen night after night tossed into the fire. She smells of lye soap and mint, cleaned at last of her afternoon’s work.

“You’ve done us a great favor, Will,” Mischa explains. She holds the bottom of the parcel with cupped hands. Will assumes it's meat, as all the buried things have been to be washed down with drink and fresh water. The linen is going pink from blood and draining viscera. “Your boar’s heart is tonight’s gift to the flame, as Hannibal hoped. It’s only right as the huntsman that you give it.”

Will hesitates, looking at the fabric and her little spindle fingers around it.

(*“Ah, but then it wouldn’t be the right kind, would it?” says Hannibal, confident. Certainty that swallows objection, you had thought. The searing heat of flames, coming to lick the edges of something made for eating.*)

All of it has been organ meat. There’s a logic in that, Will thinks. Right kind of meat, right kind of reverence. What god ever wanted a simple flank steak?

That would explain Hannibal’s awkwardness about taking him to a butcher. How strange it would have been, how typically pagan to teach a random twenty-something why this and not something more relatable - maybe a portion of a crop yield or some palo santo, or some other conventional mystic shit. Will wouldn’t have taken himself on a tour of the butcheries of Vilnius either, lonely college graduate student or not. It doesn’t matter that Will would have gone, pleased for the company.

Mischa, it seems, has no need for someone else to dress her animals, the way that Hannibal doesn’t either save for the need of space in a place like Vilnius, where the townhouses and apartments likely lack the center drains and hanging racks. She’s come from the cellar night after night, ready.

“So you’re a butcher on top of the religious rites and the horticulture,” Will says bluntly, as she passes the parcel to him. It’s heavy. The fabric doesn’t dissolve between his fingers, but it's not much between the heart and the skin of his hands. They grow tacky and cold quickly together. "I would have thought it was Hannibal."

She nods as her smile going a little thin and hooked. “It’s good to have several talents when one lives this far out into the country, and one's brother vanishes from time to time. The grocer in town isn’t a quick trip, or as fresh as I’d like, and it’s hardly a burden.”

When he unwraps it, as he invariably does, it’s certainly a heart, just as Mischa has said. He doesn't know what else it could have been, or if he hoped for something else, that peculiar sensation one has when opening an unwanted gift. Wrapped in the careful geometry of the fabric folds, it’s almost a shame to not have left it as it was, but he needs to see it to know. The vena cava sits wide and cavernous at its top. The tissue of the walls is healthy red and striated with the leanest fat and sinew.

“An excellent animal,” says Hannibal. “Young, relatively spry. It’s small wonder you had to chase as you did - not the type to go down easily.”

Sounds of pain. The scramble through brush, and the furrow between hills, and the billowing smoke of another animal’s breath that he thinks he made up, but can still feel the bristling softness of velvet on antlers.

The doubt returns. Will’s not sure how to subdue it, weighing the organ in his hands.

(*You don’t know the difference between a pig heart and a human heart, not in a substantiated way. You’ve forgiven this in the past. A lot of medical science is predicated on this similarity after all. You’re not a coroner - you don’t have this kind of training without the physicality of a body. You read lab reports, not write them. But it’s heavy. And you shot* ***something*** *, didn’t you Will?*)

“Seems a shame to burn it,” he says. It only grows heavier. It would be easier to burn it, even if it would be a shame. Will doesn’t want to carry it. He doesn’t want the continued burden of responsibility for it - he’s too busy carrying the cross from the last holiday.

“Perhaps another time you can honor it differently,” Hannibal replies slowly, but so bright-faced. He was proud in the forest, and still proud now. He’s crossed his arms, like he doesn’t quite know what to do with them in the absence of holding the package himself, or that he'd like to reach out the way he has grown accustomed to, and this is the best way to keep to himself. (*He didn’t keep them to himself before you slept - but don’t think about that.*) It must be disconcerting, having to wait and see what Will will do instead.

Will wraps the fabric back around the thickness of the heart, knots the edges, and carries it out to the strangling heat of the blazes under the eye of both siblings. They've started it early tonight, with the sun still warming the edges of the horizon, and the bonfire rages with a tall cairn of stone in the center, pushing long logs of pine into the air. He stares at it while greetings and words are spoken behind him - not English again. They come up between pavers and tables and families sitting together like they belong there.

He takes only a moment to look out and around the pyre, with either sibling at his side and outside his sight. Alana and Margot, golden faced and together. Brian and Beverly, serious and talking between each other, and unable to understand the blessings. (*You don't either, not really, only that they don't feel ominous. No worse than a Sunday sermon, no worse than a brief grace before breaking bread.*) The others are slowly vanishing, and Will has not thought to ask where.

When he tosses the parcel at Mischa's behest after her curling prayers for the night, it is quickly consumed by the flame, and with it, time to consider.

Hannibal's eyes are glistening, even as they are dark and thrown into red-orange in the glow. He holds Will's shoulders when he backs away from the flames. Will holds his breath. It still smells like wood smoke, even with the heart burning in it. He imagines he can see where it came to rest long after it's gone, and all the others before it.

The long bench beneath him, unfortunately, has no back rest. It's not something that has bothered him before now, but his spine is fluid and his head is aching as the willow and yarrow wears off, and the anxiousness of the day comes home to roost. Will drinks water, and he drinks the fruit compote, and reminds himself periodically that he must bear his own weight, at least for a little longer.

Abigail sits with a different group tonight. He likes to think she's had quite enough of Will and his rampant instability, thank you very much. Alana and Margot make themselves much more comfortable in his presence, like the mere act of participation in the commune's rituals is what kept him from their confidences. Maybe admitting to their synchronicity was a door being opened - someone else pointed it out, and now they are free to live in it, and Will is now welcome in their freedom to see it.

It’s cozier on this line of the spiral tables, spinning out from the fire. All of the finery and food is spread out amongst them, dumplings and sausage and shining fresh vegetable and fruit salads from the fields. Will’s ashamed of his lack of appetite but does manage a few mouthfuls of shining boar chops, covered with red berry jam. It tastes as heavy as the heart was in his palm, sitting in the pit of his stomach, but still sweet with sauce. He considers if he's ever seen those either, still attached at the spine, left to age and hollowed. He tries to leave his doubts with the fire; he saw them dragging in boars before he went to rest, ergo, it’s boar meat. It doesn’t quite work, but he eats anyway, one bite at a time, staring forward. It’s delicious.

(*You come from a household where plates are cleared, or they wait for you in the refrigerator. Beau doesn’t raise a son that wastes food, or turns his nose up at a meal. There’s no budget for the luxury of preference, and there’s no patience for finicky young boys that don’t understand yet what it’s like to struggle with yourself and struggle with your son and struggle with how to possibly be good to both, and there’s no hope for that to ever resolve now.*)

Will chews another bite.

A cushioned stool has been brought out for Margot to sit next to Alana on the bench, uncomfortable with taking the head of the table. Getting her swollen legs up and around the bench is a bit much these days. Will, in his man’s body with coltish long limbs that are cold more than they are hard to lift, can’t really relate, but it’s the kind of consideration that he’s come to expect from people here. It’s not even Hannibal or Mischa who does it, but an older couple that dresses to the nines in their traditional clothes and doesn’t speak a lick of English, pressing kisses to her cheeks and walking away when she’s settled.

“Everybody likes the pregnant lady,” she says, waving Alana off when Jurgita asks for her. “Feels like there’s a bizarre song or a blessing for every occasion, and I’ve been told someone’s likely to salt my kid’s head at a baptism of sorts, but otherwise everything seems above board on the baby front. Do as the Romans do, I guess.”

“Pretty bold of you to move to a remote area for your prenatal care,” he jokes. “The last of the traditional female roles, undisrupted by modern convention and science. Seems like the kind of thing they’d be into here.”

Margot smiles benignly. “Doctor Lecter goes to great lengths to make me feel more important than I am, and as he likes to say, they’ve been doing things the same at this house for hundreds of years. I’ll admit, it’s helpful when the property owner has experience doing emergency obstetrics rotations,” she says with an impish look. “I think he’s charmed by the idea of children on the property, other than his grown-up ones.”

Will nods, and looks to Jurgita, talking with Alana at the edges of the light. “‘Orphan’ is definitely a common word here. I can’t blame them, given their own circumstances. Having a kid with a parent is probably a novelty.”

He clears his throat. Not the kind of thing to casually discuss, he supposes.

“So, countryside pediatrics - can’t imagine you’re getting the twice monthly checkups. Worried much about having a boy or girl?” Will asks with a wincing nod. It’s the kind of shit he hears at barbeques and backyard parties, looking for common threads. He doesn’t really know why. What do you ask people you don’t know about their lives? Alana’s not here to scold him for being insensitive, but that’s ok - Will doesn’t need to think about that anymore.

“About as much as having a baby, honestly,” shrugs the other woman, hair gone red and brassy in the bonfire’s glow. “Scary thing, having children and having to be accountable for their happiness regardless of your own.”

“You say that like you don’t want either,” Will replies.

There’s a moment where he can see her mulling over that, swishing the thought with no bucket to spit it back into.

“I really didn’t, when I found out about it,” she says, taking a sip of her juice in queenly posture. Uncomfortable - hiding in the guise of etiquette. He can see her better now: wealthy background, finishing school, a cotillion and a pony as a girl growing up-- “The kind of family secret that you don’t talk about in company. Not something for sharing - learn to forgive it, and you’ll be taken care of. I would have been ruined for anything but being hidden away; he wouldn’t. It’s only with the support of the Lecters and the others here that I’ve changed my tune about the, ah, *gift* of motherhood.”

He , she says. The dark cloud in her skies, the inevitable catalyst to giving up wealth, and societal prominence. (*Brian, just days before, is in your ear: "I saw you a few years back at a donor program party for the Trachtenberg School - something about your brother and the foster kid program. Heard a rumour that you might have come out here."*) She drops a hand to her belly, and stares into the fire at the center of their spiralling array of tables.

Despite this, Margot has the glassy look she wears on the day of their introduction, starlet-bright and shining with the cunning of a magpie. Will respects it hugely. Even now, she wears her silver pendants at the bosom of her yellow gown, chips of amber like eyes set in metal. She keeps her meal close to herself arms at either side of the plate. She gathers Alana to her, something she loves and finds beautiful. She's been set with a valuable stone in her body, and learns to wear it well, because that's the kind of person Margot is. Making the most of what's nearby, crafting a beautiful nest.

"You get stories in careful bits and pieces around here, when you're not part of the core clan," she continues. "That's fair. That's exactly how it was back at home, and you piecemeal things out to people you like to see if they hold water. Hannibal gives out the pleasantries and the assurances, Mischa dispenses kindnesses in routine and instructions. My parents were very similar. Everyone else hems you in. You don't have to make decisions, other than the ones that leave you...free to stay."

Her lips purse. "They're less oppressive, to be clear," she adds. "It would hardly be a good trade-off if there wasn't something about it worth having. I like having myself to myself. I like being allowed to like myself, and other people like me. I like getting a say."

That sounds familiar, Will thinks with a depreciative half-smirk.

Honestly, it *is* familiar, not a mystery the way the others have made it out to be. Will could see why someone like Margot or himself would stay. Why Alana is curious about it, and trending that direction. He gets it the way that he doesn't have to ask for help sleeping, or protection, even though he's only been here for four days. He doesn't have to ask for space, or guidance, or a moment to pull himself together because Hannibal is already making room for him.

(*He only insists that he get to exist in that room with you once he's made it. Caretaker to shrines, iron and flesh alike. Not a big ask right? Not when it turns your stomach with the simple anticipation of soft touch, or the certainty of a shared joke.*)

But there’s more there, buried, as things are here.

“What decision freed you?” asks Will, toeing the cliffside of a truth. "It's kind of a big life to leave, even if an unhappy one." Brian’s accusations ring back towards him. Margot Verger, heiress, missing but not conventionally so. Her brother missing, conventionally as she isn’t. He wonders what accusations Brian will have for *him* in a year’s time, or if Matthew will be there to explain what he didn’t see in the morning hours, or if it matters. "I heard you came out here," Brian will say, "but I didn't pay attention to why."

Will palms his neck in the fire glow. Margot takes another sip of her drink, eyebrows raising. She’s quiet for a long moment, looking between him and the pyre, and their hosts, ambling and laughing and entertaining. She takes a considering bite of meat. She looks again to the Lecters. They don’t look back to her, and after a while, she takes Will's continued silence as some sort of tentative approval to continue.

"They eat all kinds of things here, don't they? she asks, fork turning roasted potatoes in the cream settling on her plate. "Boar tonight, yeah? I don't speak Lithuanian still. Just a bratty Maryland girl with an appetite. Seems they'll try anything they can find that meets a certain criteria of divine providence - I think Doctor Lecter might rather fast for nine days than have an event catered," she rambles. Will frowns, following the tines of her fork, turning, turning, turning.

“Speaking of tonight’s food of choice,” Margot continues, rocking her drinking glass on the tabletop. A nervous habit, distracting her hands. “My brother used to be a bit of a big pig enthusiast himself,” she singsongs, apropos of nothing. “ *Very* interested in how hogs will eat anything if you teach them it’s food. I think we met Hannibal at a gala in Baltimore, some celebration of wealthy donor so-and-so, who gets a wing at the American Visionary like that’s something you buy your way into and it means something...you know, as both old and nouveau riche do.”

Will doesn't, but he does. He's met a lot of people like that, even if he doesn't associate with them. He wouldn't have associated with Margot, in the time before she stayed here. She nods when she can see his impatience building, pausing for a moment like she can sense this superficial difference between them.

“He was...tolerantly amused, I’d say, at Mason’s jokes about the names of the food covering for things that most of the guest list would balk at. Terrine, confits of liver and kidney, that sort of thing. Any title that covers up for offal or connective tissue.” She blinks, casting a glance to the siblings, ambling between tables and getting closer. Hannibal’s white shirt is golden in the night, Mischa’s dress a stripe of crimson like escaped flame. “He asked if it mattered, as long as the perception of the dish was more palatable and enjoyed - needn’t waste good ingredients on someone’s fear of trying something new,” she says, staring at their hosts across the darkness. “It’s not even really a lie to name it something more appealing, just ignorance at that point.”

Will feels that click into place - very Hannibal like, even if a different flavor from the one he's grown used to. There's snatches of that cynical irreverence from time to time, hiding under the stones of his stalwartness and ease. “Your brother thought that was funny,” he intuits.

“In on the joke,” Margot continues. “Thought he had made himself a friend. Got us invited to come and see the *winter festivities* at the last minute, if he really wanted to see how a proper Lithuanian pork *skilandis* is made. I was already pregnant, just barely and not drinking, so Hannibal apologized that I might not want to partake, but that I might like to help make it. Very heavy in nitrates, those cured meats.”

Will can see it now - black tuxedo, a flash of red or green beneath and the ever present crescent tie-pin holding the white of a bowtie in place. Margot’s discomfort next to Mason, an abuser that keeps her in tow, and Hannibal seeing through that so easily the way he sees through Will’s own disguised hurt. (*Because surely that’s where this child that she totes around comes from - the sad get of a woman who can’t make a decision for herself when other people are watching.*)

The invite was for Margot - Mason’s here to play a part.

“It’s an interesting business, getting back to some nice warring tribes family values,” she says with another sip of juice. “I’d call it biblical, but Doctor Lecter frowns at that, even in debates. No room for Cain and Abel disagreements in Baltic soils - just good old human destructiveness, without a church to call home.” Another pause, another drink, some nervousness beneath her skin simmering with the smoke that rolls off the bonfire.

“I got to throw an offering on the hearth like you did the bonfire,” she shrugs, staring at it. “Kind of absolves you when it disappears like that. Everything after is just meat, just like any grocery store. Rows and rows of tidy packages, stored for people to eat. I’d know - my family’s in meat as a business. Really was just taking the next logical step to make it a matter of religious practice instead of sales contracts.”

Will’s hands feel damp again from the cheesecloth wetted with blood, even if he’s long since washed them. He fights the urge to look at them, and see how red they could be. “Really religious, throwing meat on fire,” he says, staring to where his prize heart is long since gone.

“Wasn’t it for you?” she asks, much more pointed this time, the way that Abigail can be sometimes. Or Mischa. Or Chiyoh. All these little gimlet eyed women, as certain as stars, visiting in the summer to dine with the Lecters.

But Will - Will’s good at making the connections. Margot’s still here, as is her baby that she only needed to not make a fuss about, and he’s seen nothing of her brother. As he's seen nothing of Freddie, or Tobias, or Matthew, or Katherine and Jakobus who ostensibly volunteered for the seats that they would later vacate. Will, always the clever boy in class, asks what he thinks he already has the answer to. “And where did Mason go, when all was said and done? Did he get the best of learning how to make sausage?”

“Oh, he went back to where he belonged,” Margot says, turning the bottom of a lock of hair in her fingers, considering her plate again. There’s not even a shadow of doubt in her face. “Asked how the sausage is made, and just like the joke goes, no one really wants to know. Home again, home again jiggity jog, or whatever shit made him happiest.”

“Rolling in his own filth until it gets him picked for the culling,” says Will.

It could mean nothing, just drama from his mouth. But it's not, and Will doesn't think it's received like it is. After a long pause, she nods, green eyes glittering as leaves do in the sun. Will drains his own drink, and tries not to consider that too deeply, avoiding her looks until Alana can come back, and help them transition from one thing to another. Forget the piecemeal information, the verdancy of her gaze says when he does catch her glance again. Or.

Or.

Decide if he wants to do something if he doesn't.

(*She made the decision once how best to stay here. She'll do it again. She'll keep your ex-girlfriend, your hunting spoils, your host and his attention albeit in a more chaste fashion. He's academically charmed by her fecundity, or so she's said, and that's some kind of protection. If you were her, you're beginning to think you'd do the same.*)

Will watches the fire, sitting closer and closer as the chill creeps back in. There should be a blackness in the logs where he's thrown his offering. That he can't see it any longer is a disappointment. Margot watches too, like she can still see hers, burned six months past.

Will eventually slips away, feeling cold and certain that something is wrong both with himself and with this place, and that he hasn't done anything about it. He's enjoyed so many things about it, but the pieces keep coming together in shapes he doesn't know, and there's a part of him that thinks if he comes to understand it, he'll forgive something he shouldn't. Will's the guy in forensics, and analysis. He's gifted, or so Professor Crawford says, if he can just get past his issues and bad temperament. Will should know better.

(***Knowing*** *isn't an indicator of morality, is it, Will?*)

He walks to the back of the house, away from the revelers. Will can hear them still, but their cheers and song don't trouble him. They're just people eating what's been offered.

The sidedoor to the cellar is locked when he passes it, the distant red of the flames throwing the mantel into sharp relief. Mischa has looked so small and brilliant passing through it, unfettered by its darkness. Padlocked and deadbolted, old and solid - same as the first day they arrive, no longer welcoming in the absence of its jailer. Hannibal closes the door to hide pots of honey. Chiyoh avoids it when she can. Mischa's always trotted out of it in red from head to toe with the door swung open, the lioness stalking into her arena, prowling with her sibling for what has been offered. Red's a good color for butchery.

(*Did you always think of her in those terms before today? You thought she was a dancer just last night. You suppose you've always thought of Hannibal as something in the corners to be watched, bigger than life, but secretive in truth. How did you not think to include her?*)

He can't remember if the walkway down to the lower chambers of the pantry has ever been open. They've passed the collection of early beets and turnips and carrots hanging from low rafters on the first day, herbs left to dry between shelves full of canned and jar-sealed goods. They all admired how sturdy it was, and it's little secret spaces, cold even in the heat of June. They don't look in the hidden spaces. They're not afforded the time to do so.

From the inside when Will goes through the main entrance, the other access door through the kitchen is sealed tonight as well. Will knows, because he needs to look, and he does. It is quiet and solidly closed by the brass fixtures in the low light of the kitchen, now empty for people to dine and dance outside. Will knew it would be, because he knew he is right. Will is always right. He thinks again of Mischa stepping out, his offering in hand, pulled from the prey with ease.

(*You shot him.*)

Chiyoh and Francis hauling corpses back from the woods, because Hannibal doesn't have the time to spare while Will isn't sure what he thinks he sees, and there's still several days to go that he needs polite, quiet guests, no matter how he favors their mouths or their honesty.

(*Where does the rest go? Do you think you might have eaten him, or at least given a part of him to be eaten by a consuming flame? Margot certainly did. Margot was even encouraged to do it. Margot's proud of it - her very own regional goods, crafted with salt and tradition that the Lecters are ready to pass along to those who listen and don't protest, and Margot doesn't protest good windfalls.*)

The secretiveness of its unflinching doors inside and out, splintered and worn smooth, is more damning than the second gunshot. It has an answer for him if someone will unlock it. He's rabidly certain of this. He can feel it in the chills coming back into his bones. The others here likely know, but only Hannibal and Mischa have every key to the house. Only Hannibal and Mischa know everything that passes through its doors, and out the driveway, and out into the woods.

Hannibal said it himself: “You’ve asked for nothing, only accepted what’s been offered. I look forward to seeing what you’d actually ask for.”

Will’s not sure if this is the thing he should ask for. Maybe he should simply accept it, and look no further. Return to Vilnius after being pleasant for the remaining days, keep his head down, fly back to the States and never think on it again. When people ask where his colleagues have gone, make jokes about life-changing experiences abroad. Truth is damning. It cannot be undone once it’s revealed, the same way that fate is determined, unyielding, and a constant in Will’s eyes.

Who’s at risk? comes the inevitable question. *W* ho has found their way into a pyre, or will soon, or won’t? Will **he**?

(*No, whispers your certainty. No, whispers the bird you're kin to, and wear like a necklace in bruises.*)

He’ll decide tomorrow how he feels. It’s selfish, with some of his friends still wandering the halls, but that’s when he’ll decide nonetheless. Right now, his mouth is oily with fat and red berry jams, handmade tenderly. Right now, he’s not in the right frame of mind to do much of anything other than put it out of his mind, and see if the nausea is coming. He walks backwards from the door, and carefully up the stairs to the second floor. He lights the lamp at his bedside, the other side of the room as empty as before, and stares for a while at the glow of the fires below through the amber glasswork. Will doesn’t bother with retracing his own steps this morning, or Matthew’s that come out to a far end of the forest. He already knows what they are, even if he hesitates to breathe them into firm existence, curling and white.

(*He was so proud - Hannibal was so proud, and you were so relieved that he was, and beneath your horror all you could think about was how you wanted that to happen everyday. Best in class, teacher’s pet.*)

Will falls asleep easily on top of the coverlet. He doesn’t get sick. His heart doesn’t race. In his dreams, he sits at the manor’s kitchen counter, mug in hand, facing away from the pantry door while faceless others walk into it and don’t come out. “Let bygones be bygones,” Mischa laughs from next to the hearth, and behind him, broad runed fingers comb through the curls of his hair, smoking breath jealous to be in his lungs.

Perhaps because of the early waking time the day before, Will's eyes click open when the blue light of the Lithuanian midsummer twilight starts to turn pink at the edges. It's the barest suggestion of blush between the heavy lead around each circle, like the bottom of wine bottles made warm and just a touch red, or like the mead they drink coming back from the hunt.

Perhaps it's Hannibal sitting on the opposite twin bed, white of the coverlet barely creased under his weight as he balances a pad of paper on his crossed knees, the lightest of scratchings against the surface as he drags a graphite stick over it in the shadows. Much like the morning before, there's a curious intensity to them, but rather than staring vacantly into the space that Matthew occupied, he stares instead at Will with shiny and dark eyed focus.

Will would smile at the idea of it being anything else that could have woken him, the intensity of the look being enough to wake the dead, but he also isn't sure if he should smile. Today is the fifth day of the long week. Tomorrow is the solstice proper, and someone else will have to die soon, if Will is right and the flame is fed with hearts. He doesn't know what Hannibal wants from him. He's never suspected the pulsing muscle in his chest was it, whatever it might be.

"I think the usual joke is to tell you to take a picture, and it will last longer," Will says with a rusty voice, dry from the fires and his mute hesitation of the night before.

Hannibal's eyes don't change, though his mouth quirks up, hands working over the small hatching of where Will thinks his brows should be. "I am working through the shape of you. A photograph would not give you the right form."

"What shape is that? Tired?" Will croaks, and struggles with the impulse to simply stand up and break his unintentional pose. "A little lost?"

"Restful, by your own hand," Hannibal says, eyes turning down to look at what he's done. "You missed your send-off with Mischa last night. She was very pleased to see that you were already asleep. Perhaps you are feeling better and merely need an early start from day to day. It would be remiss of me to not make sure you're feeling well - I had suspected you might have picked something up in your travels." His eyes chase the lines on the paper.

“Please,” he adds, “don’t stay still on my account. I’m finished for the moment.”

The sheets crease under Will’s hands - he flexes leg, ankle, and foot, listening to them creak and pop under the stress of his own force. The sound hides his thoughts.

(*How long has Hannibal been here that he could be done drawing? Is that just Hannibal in his entirety: perceptive, seeing through you and your hesitations even in the occasional scramble of leaves or tears that you can’t seem to hold back around him? Or has he been here for the entirety of a night, a sated animal, ready to curl up and sleep at the hearth of your dreams?*)

Will rolls and unfurls his legs, seeking the surety of the ground beneath them. It’s cool to the touch, firm, gently grooved and waxed. There are two knots in the wood to the left of his toes, and another caddy corner to his right heel, and he fights the temptation to push his feet into them, covering their gaze. They are watching him, and he is watching them, and both are ignoring Hannibal, as casual as can be. Will can see his mouth in the periphery: closed, sharp teeth beneath.

Will sighs.

Will is good at recognizing things for what they are - he said so himself just last night. It’s a profound lie to pretend it doesn’t make as much sense with the sun cresting the treeline as it does in the dim glow of the kitchen. He centers himself, listening to the *tssh-tssh-shhhhhh* of the graphite catching on paper.

Will blinks his way into proper consciousness. He summarizes, the way he would for a class. Will is in Lithuania. Will is sitting on the bed frame in a bedroom of a house that has stood in parts longer than any building he’s known, ever. He was invited to do so. He is beginning to wonder what the invite is actually for. He is not panicking but gently ushering the dread of loss back to the forefront of the mind, waiting for the boom and the recoil that he knows is the signal that it has arrived. He has a headache again. He has had one off and on for four days. It is the fifth day in a sequence of nine. It is the eve of Rasos proper, and the day will be long and the night very short. Will has feasted with Hannibal and his family, and will do so again this evening. He has hunted for his fill now. He shot a man to do it. He has likely eaten him.

(*Repeat that - that's the part you're supposed to be thinking about, the actual horror story here, not your sorry origin story. You might have eaten a man, a person you've known for two years. He slept across from you, and you hated it, and he seems to have hated you, or at least had a dark curiosity for you and what happens if you stop breathing. Fair. You do too. You cast his heart onto a pyre, and you think he might have been jelly glazed for you to suck meat from ribs that are heavy and oiled. It is a gift to gods. It is a gift to you, and you stared daft and unseeing, letting someone guide your hand.*)

(*You hesitated. You knew. You just didn't want to stop, and disappoint, or be accountable.*)

"Penny for your thoughts?" asks Hannibal. He closes the pad of paper in hand, eyes faceted to Will's face with such intensity that even Will must look away from the floor and pay them regard. "You look far away. I'd much rather you stayed here with me."

Will turns that in his head, and nods. He brings his palm up to press fingers into the ache behind his eyes.

"Just outside again, somewhere around the table," he says, pulling his hand away to meet Hannibal's gaze for once, brows furrowing to take in the other man's face, and the collar of his shirt, and how his shirtsleeves are rolled to the elbow, as they often are in the summer heat. He has thick veins there, silver-blonde hairs, and a few scars. The tail of the snake sits coiled, black. Will knows a lot of things, but he doesn't know how or why they get there, and the desire to ask is on his tongue the same way the desire to ask if Hannibal knows him the first time they meet in the lecture hall was.

"Why are you in here?" he asks instead.

Hannibal considers that, hands clasped at his knee, at ease on the edge of the bed the way he is with wielding torches and hearts over bonfires, watching out the window in his office in Vilnius, or entertaining on Will and Beverly's stained white couch in DC, or teaching from the lectern in front of an audience. Will can imagine him anywhere, and maybe that's why he captures attention the way he does. (*And you unexpectedly crave it.*)

He smiles. Will wants to match it, but doesn't. "Because I wanted to see you, and make sure you are well. Destiny shouldn't always find us outside under the trees, even if it's where it takes me most often."

Digging in the grove in the mornings, perhaps at the large cross nearest to the oak. If the hearts go to the flame, what goes to the ground beneath the shrine?

(*"I think I was looking for you," you sigh, and blink away the stag and the dirty spade of the shovel, Hannibal checking your vitals, Hannibal sighing in return "and so you have." He likes you whole, at that moment. He could have made sure you weren't if he didn't.*)

Will nods again. He feels stupid with how often he does it, but understanding keeps coming in waves, and words elude him. He almost lays back down to go back to sleep, sun brightening between the honeycomb window glass and finding his eyes watering from pain and something other. He wonders if Hannibal would tuck him in again, and walk his mind around the halls of the house into the grove, minding his steps between white flowers and ferns. He wishes he would. Will's tired of knowing better, and not choosing to do anything about it.

Beverly's at breakfast. He doesn't know why he would think Beverly *wouldn't be* at breakfast, but she is, hair pulled back loosely at the nape of her neck, staring into an empty open word document with the kind of pensiveness usually reserved for thesis rejections and judicial reviews, occasionally for FIFA tournaments when that was the obsession du jour. Will wonders which of these troubles her - surely there's something here beyond the banality of writer's block.

(*There's content aplenty here for books and books. It is not appropriate for children. You're still figuring out if it's appropriate for you.*)

She taps the stylus to the screen on the hardwood table, a plate of bacon and sliced fruit pushed away. It is untouched. "Still full from last night?" he asks, and tries not to frown when she turns to him with one of her own. She seems startled to see him. Will guesses he really hasn't done much to keep close to her. "It's not the kind of place that lets you go to bed hungry."

“You’d think,” she says, and gives Will a long look. “You’re up early, or earlier than you have been. Did you finally lay off the forest hooch long enough to string together a coherent sentence?”

Will, in his plaid flannel, still crisp from the store, shrinks into the collar until his bruised neck hurts but isn’t seen. It's too hot to wear it, but it's all he has that will hide him away. They haven’t really talked lately. He thinks that they might have not really talked in a long time, like it’s weeks between meals and days and weeks at home, and not just a couple of days. He avoids her eyes, but Beverly is never one to flinch away from getting an answer to a question.

Will scratches his head to buy time and think about that, and stretches his arms upwards overhead. He enumerates bones from spine, to scapula, to clavicle, to humerus, twisted ulna and radius, metacarpals, tiny phlanges, touching at the air. His head hurts, but his body is strangely rested and waiting. He slept well. It's strange to even think it. He doesn’t even know how alarmed he really is at Hannibal sitting as prim and unshakeable as the oak in the space across the room from him.

He belonged there. Will can hardly fault him for it.

“It’s just tea...works a hair better than a couple of Tylenol and a glass of water, I can tell you that,” Will jokes, diffusing his own awkwardness. “Kind of miss the candy coating though - it all tastes pretty awful.”

Beverly shrugs. “I guess they’re more natural people and less ‘take two and call me in the morning’. Hard to casually grow ibuprofen in a hedge next to the house and mix it with the fun stuff.”

“I don’t think there’s been any fun stuff,” Will lies.

(*You float from the forest floor, toes dragging the tops of moss, reaching down to brush them. The leaves rush and blow with your breath, and you pretend the morning isn’t a slow disaster unfolding. Anxiety cure, says Mischa and Hannibal. Something else, says you.*)

“Just some old school herbs. Probably clears my chakras or purges bad humours...I didn’t ask. If anyone’s having fun with their cottage medicine,” (*you were, for a moment, when you suddenly weren’t*), “then I don’t know about it.”

“So you can tell me where Matthew is,” she replies crossly, and that’s the actual last thing Will wants to think about. “I tried to ask yesterday, but you were high as a kite. I didn’t see him before he left, and both the Lecters said to ask you about it.”

Will hesitates, fingers flexing. “He went home.”

(*In a fashion. Do bodies have homes? Daddy certainly didn't, not once the cremation was complete. Maybe on the Great Lakes to settle with the sediment of ancient glaciers. He'd hate it. You do too. You don't know what's left of Matthew. You can’t prove anything, you don't even know for sure, but neither can she.*)

Beverly doesn’t bat an eyelash. She just closes her laptop with a clean swipe of her hand, and turns to fully face him. “He was *sent* home, allegedly. Pretty ironic, seeing as Tobias seems to have been ‘sent home’ too. Know something about that, too?” she chides.

Tobias. He hasn't thought much about him. Will saw him go into the woods, but never saw him come back out. He was with Chiyoh, wasn’t he?

“I don’t know, did Tobias take a crack at my neck too?” he snidely replies, uncomfortable with her scrutiny. He’s not really had time to consider *other people* in his accounting of events. He’s starting to understand what he’s done - he’s not quite ready for other people to see it too. They wouldn’t get it, all the little micro decisions that happened. They don’t have the history. They aren’t trying to make sense of why the history would make a difference, but Will can, and he is.

Beverly pauses at that, searching his face with a frustrated grimace. Her eyes land on the space between chin and shirt, where Will suspects his bruises are blooming as happily as garden roses peeking over the fence that is the shirt collar. “He hurt you?” she asks, and Will nods, choking down his discomfort.

There's a pause between them, before she taps the stylus in her hands against the table top, a nervous habit giving sound to her growing confusion. Her eyes drift between the computer screen, to Will, to the doors that lead away from this heart of the house, as though suspicious to be heard. Maybe she should be. Will's certainly suspicious of most things now in the light of the morning, despite his desperate bid for normalcy.

"Jesus," she says after a moment. "I'm sorry. I knew he was a creep on some level, but I never thought he'd actually *do* something about it...I guess he was kind of weirdly fixated on you." She stops here to think for a moment, looking for the right words, like they pain her, not the correct ones, but still right. "Good on the Lecters I guess to give you final say on what got told."

Will almost winces, pained as well. He could tell her what he thinks. *I'm pretty sure I ate him, and maybe intentionally burned parts of the evidence, so don't worry about my feelings,* he could say. *Turns out I'm not much better than him, maybe worse. Have you considered running away with speed? From the house? From me?*

(*She has, you think.*)

"It's fine," he says instead.

There's a long pause between them, where Beverly seems to be at a loss as to what to say. She had something else on her mind when he came in, that's for certain. Will's vulnerability has lost its charm in the months following the first time she takes down her fairy lights, but even she doesn't wish harm on him. They were like brother and sister once, in their ambitions. It's hard to drag herself out from the current of it, even now. Will's learnt to watch her do it, and let it happen.

"You're fine," she repeats, a little quiet, suspicious. She's always had a good nose for these things. Beverly shakes her head, working past that. The thing she wants to say is surfacing - Will can see it in how she pulls her hair back over her shoulders, eyes tight and squinted looking back out the door into the garden and grove beyond. It's only the glow of morning sunlight from here, but beyond are voices, laughing, the rustle of foliage in a gentle breeze.

“Watch yourself,” she says, shaking her head. “Alana’s practically gone native, so I haven’t been able to catch her by herself long enough to say anything without Jurgita or that Verger chick around, but the vibe has gotten weird since yesterday. Can't get anything out of Abigail about the rest of the week. Can't get Mischa Lecter to explain either. I’ve been thinking about asking to go into Utena and leave, but Brian’s not ready to go, and apparently tonight is the main event, so to speak, so no one in the commune is in a particular hurry to run an errand. Maybe tomorrow. I’d call a cab, but,” she gestures around. “No signal.”

Will nods. He hasn’t missed the phone. He hasn’t been afraid enough before to really think about it before last night.

(*Something you see, but dare not speak: you’re glad Matthew’s gone, and no one will ever know exactly how other than Hannibal. That’s a shame and a relief. It’s the worst showing of you, but the most appropriate spectators of that side of you, prey and witness alike. He’s just another animal in a hunt, you want to say, do you see it?*)

Will nods. “On my best behavior, scout’s honor,” he says, and gives a mock salute. Anything to get further away from the truth. “I’ll keep an eye open for Freddie,” he adds, even with his private misgivings. She doesn’t mention Freddie, but Freddie and her red hair brings Mischa to mind, and Hannibal’s implication that Freddie had been bothering Mischa. “Probably best to stick together where we can - god knows Brian will find a way to get kicked off the property too if left to his own devices. Check in with each other around noon?”

It’s harder to pick off the weak when you stay in the herd, Will guesses. He’s just not sure what herd he’s supposed to be running in to be safe. People like Will aren’t accustomed to pack dynamics. They don’t know the sound of friends next to the sound of foes.

Beverly nods like *yes, yes, exactly* . Group leader, thinking of collateral now, and projected losses. How much she suspects is still a question. Will keeps waiting for the guilt of not telling her how much he does to come down on him, but he is still and calm and still stretching in the bed upstairs - observed. Appreciated in form as well as thought.

(*Another thing you see: yes, Hannibal sees it. Yes, Hannibal appreciates the joke. But you suspect Hannibal sees animals for hunting in all of the creatures under the sun, and you’re afraid you are one in a shape you don’t understand yet.*)

do nesting cares make thee to moan

Chapter Notes

This is where that extremely dubious consent tag comes in.

Much about life in the Lecters' world is full of color, wildly contrasting to the greying stone of the house, and walls that gate the front drive from the woods, and the progression of well-worn wooden and slate floors that run through the mute halls. The runner carpet of the stairs is saffron gold. The window glass is tinted in yellow, and rose, and the softest of jade. They keep their linens white and their clothes embroidered for the harshest contrasts.

Will, more accustomed to dull brown, khaki, and olive, (*and red; because you like it, because it's warm, because it reminds you of delicate fibers of capillaries*) learns in his five days here so far to expect the shock of something vivid if he doesn't see it at first glance, like it was hiding, and merely waiting for him to pull away a drab shell. There's heavy black berries in the shrubs, winking like eyes behind leaves. There's a blushing pink drink in the dull pewter of pitchers, with pitted cherries and plums, and hearts in the white of cheesecloth. The sharp-toothed smiles that read violent-dark in the young and old faces of the congregation. There's wet-handed girls that claw ruddy at fathers and brothers, slow to unfurl and show their shape unless they see it in you. Flavorful things that you have to get a taste for before you can see them. The horror of the flavor does nothing to dull their vibrance.

Hannibal wears his colors front and center to distract, but the others cover them in their plumage, a last minute warning, or their hidden nature. Will watches Hannibal's sister now, a dimorphic shade of him with disguised brightness in the morning sun, leading the group. Her clothes are very clean at this hour, perhaps with nothing to trim and hang in the cellar - no need for a butcher's apron, or the disguise of a red frock.

The activity of the day, in opposition to the day before and befitting her soft attitude, is a gentle pastime.

“Flower crowns and oak wreaths are important for the eve of Rasos proper,” Mischa says, tiptoeing in the cold grass, barefooted and dressed all in green today.

In the eaves of the house, where the sun still doesn’t touch the stone, mounds of flowers and greens have been piled in tidy order, sorted by color across tables. There are no long rifles, or skinning knives. Slow sips of iced wine and filtered coffee make the celebrants eyes go wide and glassy against tired nights, hangovers, and the work of another long day.

Will hesitates to think more on that. He’s feeling very clear today, even as he is slowly simmering and freezing in turns in his own skin after speaking with Beverly. His head hurts, and the shadow of the house makes him cold, but it’s practical to keep the plants fresh. (*The cold of a cellar is practical to keep the meat fresh too, right?)* The chill is furthermore practical for covering his neck, with the impractical flannel that makes him look more like Hannibal, and less like a victim.

When Hannibal joins the group, Will wishes he hadn’t worn it, as though it waves him down from one side of a clearing to the other.

(*A reminder to yourself to keep your hands to your sides or on the tables: don’t bother the other children, play by the rules, don’t make a fuss. Don’t draw attention to yourself.*)

Rue, wild rose, bilberry branches, daisies, white pea, linden, nameless others that Will’s never seen, some in jars, others lain flat, all in a wide spread across the narrow tables against the stonework. Tomato stems too, and fruiting branches with their thorns and all. The variety is impressive for their country garden. Many are still damp with dew, and the sticky wet of the earth and the sap of plants they are pulled from. The sap catches the palms of young women and men, elders conspicuously absent save for a few. Will minds his fingers, hesitant.

“Nine types of flowers are needed for the women for their youth and beauty,” she continues sweetly, “and the surety of oak leaves for the men, for their wisdom.”

The oak leaves, pulled from their sire in the center of the sacred stillness of the *alkas* , are dark and glossy even in the shade. Will shudders at the thought of them being plucked. It’s

arrogant somehow, robbing it of its fingered branches and perches, his fey-eyed bird disturbed in his singing in the grove.

"Wise, *unlike* the women?" asks Will with a snort at the irony. All the women that live here seem to know something he doesn't, an uncomfortable change of pace, but he's learning. Alana merely rolls her eyes at his tone, while Margot smiles secretly, like it's a joke.

(***You*** *are certainly unwise. Why are you still here? Why didn't you run down the road at first light and first chance to slide past Hannibal's piercing consideration, taking anyone you thought that was sane with you? You could have told Beverly in the kitchen, or Alana in the hall before coming into the shadow of the house and back under Mischa and Hannibal's eyes. You've had moments alone, and all you've done with them is sit mute, watching.*)

Mischa seems to find this funny, even if Alana doesn't, and Margot keeps it to herself - her nose scrunches at the bridge in her impish delight, where the unusual blue hazel of her eyes has grown thin and knife-edged by her fair lashes. Her hands are not meat-bloodied today (*right now, you correct*), but they have red fingers anyway, irritated by something from the plants. An allergy maybe, or the stubbornness of someone who won't be cowed by a nettle or a sting. That sounds like Mischa, too persistent to be bothered by the mild resistance of evolution. It sounds like her brother too.

"Hardly," she replies, turning through long stems of rue, twirling one to admire the yellow of the flowers. They have a bitter smell, and the largest pile, and the other women handle it with white gloves, like museum curators or lab technicians. Careful. It's unthinkable that after all that delicacy, they'll put it on their heads, their caution forgotten. "The sexes are components of a more perfect whole, equal in stature. For us, anyways. Maybe not for the Christians. Maybe not for the worshippers of other gods. Saule beats down on our skin all the same."

"But the tradition persists," Alana says, gathering a posy of licorice, their purple spires and fronds spilling over the tops of white hands. "The iconography is important, even if it's meaningless."

To her right, shuffling through the bright green-white clusters of fennel and dill blossoms, Hannibal is every bit at ease here as he was with the paper and pencil in the still dawn hours.

“Meaningless?” he asks, turning herbs between his fingers, considering the undersides, and the small yellowing sunburnt tips of them. He frowns. “No, I think not. That’s rather like saying that wine and bread for the Eucharist are rote instead of sacred, or a lotus is no better than any other bloom in Buddha’s paradise. The symbolism has a basis of belief. You are free to apply it as you wish.”

“Not one to be inconvenienced by flowers?” Will asks. Hannibal doesn’t seem the type to be inconvenienced by anything.

“I don’t let tradition temper what I like,” Hannibal replies casually, strolling to another table’s pouring bounty with a head of dill in between ponderous fingers, the one that pleased him most. “And I find I rather like herbs and spring *raktažolė* ,” he adds, snapping up and twirling the heavy head of a stem with venous crimson and gold flowers trumpeting from it, wide lobes of the blooms pulling heavily downwards. “All edible, as I prefer.”

“Looks like a brain on its stem,” Will says, as he does. Absurd, almost garish looking, little cross-section arteries exploding from their clusters that they can like in common the same way Will likes the occasional punch of red. They suit Hannibal, and the people that he surrounds himself with. “Needs seasoning to not taste bitter.”

Brian and Beverly, holding themselves separate up to this point, share a look. Suspicion is reasonable, even if Will doesn’t think they understand the significance of the words. Will tries to not understand it either, and think about how he is perpetuating a slow moving disaster on the remaining four of them, and that he’s stupid to think it’s not.

(*Don’t forget: you are.*)

Hannibal doesn’t look at Will, and fortunately seems to not look at the others, but Will can feel his pleasure at the statement all the same, brief across the space like the wide arc of his hand drawing. Will thinks he’d say something if they were alone: *do you know? How did you find out? Is it to your taste as much as mine?* But maybe he wouldn’t say anything at all. Maybe Will’s wrong.

Hannibal considers the flower in his hand before laying it back down amongst the others, the dill still held carefully to him. “A recipe,” he says, sharp, delighted, and turns to Mischa and Will. “And mine to wear with my wizened oak leaves to my heart’s content.”

Mischa nods, placid, rising and rocking on her toes coyly. “Uniqueness is important. You throw the crowns and wreaths into the water, and whichever one of the others they touch first is who you are meant to be with,” she explains. “Wouldn’t be very useful if you can’t tell them apart,” she says with a wink, and braids two plaits of daisies and fruitless tomato vine together for herself.

Margot, next to Alana, rolls her eyes, and pushes a hip into Alana’s side, the kind of casual flirtation that Will has always been embarrassed to show. She won’t be wandering the woods in search of love, as fertile as she already is, but tradition demands a bounty on her head anyway. “Hope everyone's aim is good in the dark,” she drawls.

Hannibal takes a pinch of the dill leaves, plucked from their stem, and considers them between his thumb and index finger. Rolls them, brings them to his nose to smell the expression. “It’s likely most people have decided exactly who they want to aim for, and always have - fate, as we respect her, serves the people who listen to her best, and what better indicator of fate is there than attraction?”

He rolls the dill again, favors them with a glance when they are dark and bruised, and puts it to his mouth with the contemplation of a communion wafer.

Will ignores the roll of his stomach. He ignores the wet pink of Hannibal’s mouth as well, something he imagines pressed against the scrapes on his palms, like the man had put them there himself rather than the rocks and the hard ground of the forest he professes a pious love for. It’s just as native to imagine it chewing the sinew of a vena cava, rubbery and essential as aim tonight in the dark.

“Shall we put some blooms in with yours as well?” Mischa says with half a smile, favoring a stem of cornflower, like she’s seen him think. “Something to stand out a bit from the canopy?”

Will thinks on that, and the heavy leaves.

“Shouldn’t I pick a lane? Can’t be hoarding the beauty *and* the wisdom,” Will huffs, watching the bloom winking between her pale fingers, rolled from right to left in the lines of

her palms. She doesn't crush it, but neither does she put it down.

(*Maybe it's wise to forget what you're doing - nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to hesitate to accept. You can have your meals, and your walks, and your gentle afternoons waking in the sunlight while gentler hands move you along. Mischa will prompt you. Hannibal will guide. You'll have earned your oak leaves after all, but only if you say nothing.*)

"You are entitled to both," she says, stuffing lindens between the white eyes of the daisies and the fruitless green of the sepals.

Will nods, and plaits narrows sapling stems of flowering birch and white yarrow together with the glossy oak. Mischa tells him they're good choices - sturdy, unwilting. It doesn't sound much like Will, until she tucks little fragrant may bells in with it, and tells him to keep it cool for tonight.

"They discolor easily when you handle them," she explains, and that sounds truer to the mark.

Noon fades into golden sunshine, and the preparations for the evening begin to overtake the estate once more in a strange clockwork that Will has a hard time imagining any other way. The tables and benches are carried into the back courtyard by any spare hands, though the young are a sight more fey today in their wreaths and crowns, bacchanal and laughing like this is a smoke break between classes, or getting ready for Shakespeare in the Park. Perhaps to them it is, and it's only the unfamiliarity that casts a pall.

The light from the day drives Will inside where it can't hurt his eyes, nor the sounds of birds and insects his ears, but he watches anyway from the windows of the house. The building of the pyre in the center of the path reminds him it's not a production of a play, and that something will need to go into the flames, as it did the night before, and the night before, and the night before.

Surely this is all temporary - nine days, they said, but how comfortable everyone is with what's happening here is what makes Will question if he *does* actually understand what that is.

The lily may bells of his wreath nod in the sun as he does, and Will turns away to sit in the quiet of a front parlor room instead. Abigail is happy to find him a quiet space without shaming him back into his room. (*You're tired of being sent there, like you did something wrong and are in time out. You did, mind you, but so did everyone else, and you're tired of being the odd man out when their mouths are as sticky as yours - your sin is that you know why and* ***persist*** .)

The windows in the front drawing room are old and bubbled as the ones in his room are, but clear instead of yellow, and leaded with chevrons, pointing downwards with a diamond nested at the top of each pane. They draw the eye to the ground below, overlooking the front driveway, and beyond that the gate which is open for visitors. Familiar somehow. The drapes to either side of it are a heavy brocade, cool to the touch. Will presses his right eye to it in relief. Not quite a cold compress, but helpful.

"I like it better in here than the rest of the house," she says, a crown of her own in hand and away from her head where it can't knot up her long hair. It's the usual jeans today, awkwardly shuffling feet in tidy black boots and white linen shirt that doesn't suit her, like it should have been dark and featureless as shadow. "Less people," she shrugs. "I don't think anyone really uses any of the old rooms - at least not in the summer. This was the first thing I saw in the house when I came here for the first time...I remember thinking this was such a crazy place, how out of our league the Lecters' were."

"Very formal of them, bringing house guests in for tea," Will says over a wave of nausea, but considers that.

Abigail and her father, in their hunter khaki, with their American passports, and their down jackets, wielding little sheets of paper that allege they have a claim. *"Please have a seat,"* Hannibal would say, *"and we'll take a look at just what kind of claim you have."* And the answer is none, absolutely none save a permit issued by an authority with no respect beyond the front gate, and Will is learning that's a dangerous kind of claim to have here. However, Hannibal didn't pick them, not the careful way that Mischa implies that he does, and you bring unexpected guests to the living room for coffee and cake, not out to the family hunting grounds. Duty calls, the government is watching, and the disaster has to unfold as fate intended.

(*It does. Always, it does, and it did for Abigail, as it did for Margot, as it did for you. But unlike them, you envy their ability to make a decision, instead of watching it happen, mute and buzzing like static in the aftershocks of the gun going off, and the tinsel in the tree winking against the overlarge lights.*)

“I talked to Margot last night,” he says. “About dinner.”

Abigail, turning the crown still between tiny fingers, nods. The scar down the middle of her neck makes a tidy swipe of a brush between the falls of straight hair, too red to have healed properly. “I know.”

Will presses the chill fabric of the curtain closer, and shuts his eyes to the window.

He doesn’t know what kind of concession he was expecting. People talk of course, but do they talk about how fine the fresh preserves were, or instead about how difficult it is to break a rib loose from a sternum? How do you clarify if it’s a running gag between them and the others that the guests keep disappearing?

Will finds himself smiling into the window regardless, unseen.

“Do you think that’s where I’m headed next? That I have a seat at the table still?”

Abigail seems to think on that for a minute. She likely doesn’t know much of anything - she seems the type to avoid it. “I hope so,” she says a little too lightly, like she wants to laugh but hasn’t quite strangled it out. (*Got stuck on the way up - hard to get things past a cut like hers, you think, running a hand along your own neck.*) “Seeing as it’s only in a couple of hours. Would be kind of awkward after they made you do the arts and crafts part of the day.”

“And the night after that? And the night after that?” Will asks, and turns to look at her. With her slouched shoulders and low head, Abigail still looks young to him, someone he grades papers for, leaves little notes in blue ink where their arguments fall apart. Abigail might not

ever go to college, or grow up the way that kids learn to when they leave their parents behind for the first time, and that sets her further apart than even that, and Will can't decide if that's sad or if that's empowering. She chose it, so the latter, surely.

"I think you're welcome to stay as long as it makes you happy to," she admits, with a pursed mouth. "That's what they offered me when I had nothing else, or that's what Hannibal did, anyway."

"And if you have something else that makes you happy?"

"***Do*** you?"

Will doesn't. The degree, the crappy apartment, the closed escrow account with half a house's worth of money still sitting in it unused when the debts are paid off for his Daddy, and his student loans, and not working for the better part of six months - those are just things he has.

The things that make him glow inside, light up like the streetlights outside his bedroom window thousands of miles away, or daytime glittering on the lake, well those are small, and uncertain, but they are here.

There's the careful silence of stone, and places to wander. There's distance from home, but the uncanny familiarity of everything regardless - an old South, or a new one, growing and nestled in the market roads and forests that separate it from the otherness of the cities of Europe. He's surviving out here, with other people that have learned to survive, and it's more than he managed by himself between the moment the ambulance lights appeared and the moment the airplane hit the tarmac in Vilnius. There's kinship here.

(*But it's not the whole truth, is it? There's the unoppressive but constant regard of the house's keeper. There's the dark scholar that sees your honesty and macabre tongue. Hannibal respects your wild intuition. Hannibal thinks it's a gift, the way that high water after years of drought is a gift, tearing at embankments, docks, the edges of the land until what remains are the essentials. Tree roots. The bones of men and ice ages. Strength in survival, and hunger.*)

(*You are happy and you are afraid of that regard. You don't know what to expect from it.*)

“No,” he says, twirling his own wreath in hand the way Abigail has industriously done from hallway to parlor to hallway again, ready to spring away. “No I suppose I don’t.”

He feels tremors in himself, very fine, tectonic shifts that change him until he’s not sure what the new shape of his body will be. Unlike the debris of forces exacting change on him, this one comes from underneath - somewhere between the sensation of being recognized as other in the dim lights of an auditorium, and the ice that has come to live in his bones even in a warm summer afternoon, and heavy sheltered nights.

The feast before Rasos is hardly deprived of its own rituals, though they are the rituals of a neighborhood party, or a backyard wedding. The gathering tonight feels more familiar and less fraught with Hannibal and Mischa Lecter’s religious adherences. Straight tables to look each other in the eyes. No prayers. More weaving voiced songs. Only the hollow door to the pantry like an eye pushed down and into the house’s skull is a blight, and no lights in the windows to guide people back inside.

Watching revelers kiss cheeks and smile so widely feels akin to the first feast. That Easter Sunday ease is in their mouths and faces again, as the start of the week had been, and Will is the only child of a poor man sitting in the wings of the church. The countryside is persistent in its similarities - despite the shadow of the grove is rising in the west, and the candles and torches lit at the edges of the feast, the loam of the soil is rich and heavy in the humid air, and the impression of sons and daughters of small towns looks the same in the highlands of Lithuania as it does in the hills and river valleys of the South.

He’s out of sorts all the same. Will doesn’t recognize the fervor in their eyes as something of his own, even in his laurels and a wide cup of mead in front of him, Abigail stiff at his side, and Alana with Margot near him in each other’s company once more. With their big crowns of purple and pink heather and simple chamomile, they match the soft warm shades of the sky, and the three bright stars rising as the darkness falls. They are talking tonight of fall and winter, and what Alana might see if she stays, and Will, glad at their connection but skeptical of Alana’s understanding of what’s implied, almost leans into Margot to ask “When do you tell her about the rest? The brother? The willingness to not have one? Do you ever? Is cognitive dissonance the key to a happy, long life here?”

He doesn’t, but he wants to, as his curse demands.

Perhaps he hasn’t drunk enough yet. A good attitude sometimes follows, even in the face of migraines and moral quandaries. His head, like the pantry cellar door, is a void.

(*You decline Mischa’s remedies, when she catches you walking on to the broad back lawn pathway with Abigail. “I’d like to stay clear tonight,” you say shyly, eyeing the steaming kettle not far behind the chittering of the leaves and alkaloid smell of her crown. More telling than the rest of her. “Slept better last night without,” you add, like it wasn’t exhaustion and the need to not think for a while that drive you to bed, and her tinkling laugh and her brother’s crushing insistence aren’t in the spaces between dreams.*)

There must be families other than Hannibal and Mischa and their ragtag children of the west here. He wouldn’t recognize them. He’s not really a part of them, even if he’s fallen into a strange comfortable silence between them. Will’s been the odd man out at every meal since the one following the first, and has been adopted from night to night, depending on who’s up to the challenge. It has the same flavor and searing heat of coming into a new school year after year, following his father’s work instead of staying in any one place. Who will be ok with how he speaks? Who will be the first to find out that he holds nothing back that he should, even when he’s capable of the niceties? There weren’t many Beverly Katzes then, and it’s only by a technicality that there is one now.

The seating arrangement, by Will’s understanding: the Americans on night one, and the rest that are intended to die. The numbers were important, after all. That might not have changed. The same on night two, scattered now, less dependent on Hannibal’s approval where they sit. Night three with Abigail, who’s getting the measure of him. Night four with Margot, who has it, and wants to see what it looks like up against her own.

Night five, Will watches what he suspects is Tobias’ heart disappear into the smoke and flames by Hannibal’s hand in the growing twilight, still rosy and yellow where the sun is touching the earth beneath the trees, and thinks maybe Tobias would enjoy this kind of end, obsessed with meaning and culture as he was. It’s only right that Hannibal does it - his cheekbone has bloomed with the force of the bruise Will couldn’t place in the forest. *Defensive wounds* , the part of him entrenched in forensics says.

Mischa is again in her red frock, and hands the wrapped heart over as one serves a prized slice of cake. Margot is in her queenly gold, and averts her eyes to look instead at the woman

at her side, hands absently holding herself round the middle. Beverly and Brian do nothing - no walking to introduce themselves to the others, no notes, but keep their full attention on the proceedings around them. The crowd stands and cheers the ending of some foolish man from the California coast not because of his hubris, but because he wasn't a better shot or a better runner, or maybe both.

(*You look at the plate in front of you. Maybe you're misreading Abigail. Maybe Margot's a liar. Maybe you're an unreliable narrator. You could ask. You don't think you should though - there's plausible deniability between gaps in your time with others, and gaps in your awareness of others at all. But you could ask.*)

Unlike the nights prior, Will takes a seat with Abigail who restlessly fiddles at the carefully embroidered cuffs of her shirt, only for her to drift away with the tap of a shoulder as if she's been waiting for it, and the afternoon is a chore, not a favor to Will.

He resents it for only half a second, until she's readily replaced by the only person that Will was ever here to see. She slides away, and in her seat, Hannibal rolls to statue stillness, no longer ambling between guests, no longer master of ceremonies. Will almost doesn't recognize him in the wreath, like it's a disguise the way the suit was two months ago.

"Is this seat taken?" he asks, like it's been cold and empty and just waiting for him to pour his heat into its hollows.

Will's stomach curls in on itself, spine shivering in anticipation, and shakes his head.

(*You could ask.*)

"All the seats in the house are yours to take, aren't they?" Will asks, and spares a glance at the younger girl, disappearing into the parts of the crowd still milling about. That's not what he really wants to know, but the alternative is to be obvious - *will you sit with me? Will you give me what I want?*

"I suppose they are, but one hopes the company surrounding them is obliging," Hannibal says, perfectly content in his new space and crossing his legs in elegant dishabille. It feels

wrong for him to be here, just another attendee instead of untouchably revered, but he picks this spot the same way he picks the empty bed of Will's room with a handful of graphite pencils. "I think I may have finally said hello to everyone," Hannibal hums with a smile, all in black again with a red sash at his waist. He's not much larger than Will, but with the rigid hold of his shoulders and the confidence he takes a glass of his own in hand, Will feels small by comparison in his white shirt and jeans, red flannel abandoned in a moment of self-consciousness.

The shadow of Hannibal's wreath casts a shade on his face, the lines and valleys of it pitted and stony where the wrinkles and smiles disappear. "Dreadfully poor for listening to much of anything, these crowns," Hannibal says, giving his head a little shake. The leaves rustle, snickering.

He's not wrong. Will has to fully turn his head to see around the periphery of the oak and birch branches. They catch on the curls in his hair when he adjusts it - hardly Christ's thorns, but burdensome. Hannibal playfully pushes his own back when they again brush against each other in a crinkling whisper, tossing them over his shoulder to bounce back.

"Good thing you came over to sit with me," Will teases, slouching and sullen. "I'd hate for anyone to be put through a frank conversation without something to help dull the sound of my voice."

"Quite the opposite. It's akin to our time in the trees," Hannibal rejoins easily, "where I can hear you and your counterpart most easily."

Turning his drink in hand, avoiding faces and the glare of the fire, Will smiles wryly at that. "An animal best suited for outdoor spaces - poorly socialized, more in common with birds known for parasitic nesting."

"Do you often feel like an impostor, Will?" Hannibal looks up into the crowd, but Will feels his attention like a brand on his skin. "I admire a creature that is obviously different but able to play to a crowd," he says. "Watching from the outside has its merits, as does participation. You have the full measure of what you see. The fascination and the joy."

"Do I?" Will says into the blush pink of his drink, headache brewing at the edges of his head, even as his heart races. "Have the full measure of what I see?"

(*You could ask.*)

“I suspect you have the full measure of the parts you’ve guessed,” Hannibal says lightly in reply. “You are a clever creature on your high branch.”

“What do you think I should do about it? Since you think I’ve got it all figured out,” Will asks, thinking again of Abigail in the front room, the long scar of her neck, and the time before her disillusionment. Does she miss that? Is it better to know from the beginning? He rubs his eye, stinging against the sharp lights of the candle flames burning trails into the afterimage there.

“Part of it, yes. You’ll have to decide what you want and take it,” Hannibal replies, unbothered by Will’s reticence. “I decided I wanted this,” he says, palms up, inked fingers a scroll in the corner of his vision. “The simplicity and the ritual, mankind rendered back to its most essential beliefs and needs. Elemental forces. Family. Sacrifice.”

Will watches the fat separate on a tray of pastries, dough pinched at its edges by the women and men here. They simmer the meat with onion, stuff it into buttery shells, and put it out on the tables with the passiveness of sugar and milk offered with coffee. They don’t question if they should have done it, what righteousness there is here. They bring them instead to their mouths, and are fed.

Will looks away from it, and bites into a strawberry from a plate of cheeses and honey, but is left hungry. Hannibal watches that too, and looks like he feels much the same.

“You should stay,” Hannibal says. “You can decide that, if it pleases you. It would please *me* at the very least, to see you return to what you are instead of politely hiding it. Nothing to feel conflicted about, no debts to society or to your friends. Put on your saddest face. Sleep in all the beds. The house, like the chairs, is mine and my sister’s, and you are welcome to it all.”

(*You could ask.*)

Will licks his lips, and the sour juice that sticks there.

(*You could ask - in a way, you do.*)

“Will you show me everything if I do?” Will asks quietly. “Instead of dancing on the edge of it? Not just the parts I’ve guessed. You called me a bystander when we met - do you still really want to know what I think?”

The dark pits of his face are now the hidden corners of a childhood closet, or the window shades cutting the streetlight, or the comfortable shade of the darkest parts of the forest. Thin mouthed, jagged toothed in the fullness of his widening smile, the certainty and confidence of a monster in his own rural corner of a proud man’s country. He’s everything that Will has worked to get away from, and that he’s been told is the face of a gifted demagogue. He’s untrustworthy.

But so too is he handsome, and clutching at the connection of Will’s atria and ventricles to body, without the sharpness of the surgeon’s scalpel or hunter’s knives. Will doesn’t feel forced on him. He feels like someone he knows already.

“I will show you all tomorrow,” Hannibal says around his strange joy, hand raising to Will’s head. It follows the sweating brow with the back of his fingers, walks to the notch of jaw and neck where the blood flows underneath and hesitates there, like he wants to touch the bruise underneath the collar. He draws back, flicking a strand of may bells as he goes.

“Everything in its fullness,” Hannibal says, “as the longest day demands.”

He disappears the way Abigail does - quickly, separate from the rest, but welcome to them. The sash teases the way the ones during the hunt do, marking him a real person, while all the others surrounding him are but prey.

Will shakes in his seat, one part anxious and another part burning ice-cold in his bones, and the birch leaves rattle in his ears.

Will finds Margot again, before dinner transforms itself from the pleasant mulling about of the well-fed into the midnight famished delight it is purported to be, and the circlets of growing things on every unwed brow find their way into new hands and lake water. There's a properness to the glowing faces in their corona of reds, white, yellow, and soft purple-blues against the redness of skin and white clothes. Even Alana, more inclined to things softly dyed and decorated, looks like a fair queen in milk-fresh linen next to the grand yellow of Margot's gown, the angel of an Annunciation. They receive him with the same big smiles of everyone else, and press him between them.

(*You remember something like this once - Beverly and Alana, and a dive bar on the Arlington side of the river for some cheap show where Beverly's dating the bassist, and Alana's not yet turned off by the reality of actually dating you. "We're your wingmen," they say, and you are for a time safe and wedged between them, part of the whole, and you remember being happy even if you don't remember the band name, or the bar name, or how long it's been when you remember everything else. Right now tells you that it can happen again. You can be a piece of a bigger, prettier picture.*)

They pour him another drink. They ask him if he saw Hannibal. (*Yes.*) They ask if he's feeling better. (*No.*) They don't pull apart until an hour passes, and a sort of calm tiredness comes to sit in his head and hands while sitting as close to one of the smaller fires that he can without burning his feet. He waits for the excuse to come to leave, but Beverly pulls Alana aside instead, and Will finds his opportunity instead to ask a question of the Verger heiress.

There's one thing that Hannibal cannot answer for him. Not for lack of trying, or lack of a turn of philosophical phrase, but because Will doesn't think a night creature like Mischa describes her brother as giving much thought past the moment he decides something is alike to him or alike to food. Predators are without guilt. Proud firstborns and hunters find it in short supply.

He turns to Margot, and the earthy freshness of her crown.

"Does it bother you, now that it's not your brother?" he asks without restraint, or preparation. Better to get an honest answer. Even shutting down would be more honest than something measured and mixed into conversation in timed increments.

Her face is studiously blank. She would make a great card player, as accustomed to unnerving statements thrown at her like grenades as she is. Hannibal must have thought she was quite the find. Will's almost proud of her - none of her edge dulled by safety from her greatest threat.

"Can't think it's an everyday thing," he says. "Hard to cover up that many people coming in and not coming out, and there's a lot of plates at this particular potluck, don't you think?"

If Will expects Margot to be embarrassed, she isn't. "Would it bother you when in exchange you get to feel wanted? Necessary?" she asks in turn. "I didn't have that. Most of us didn't."

Will doesn't either. It's why he's still here. He doesn't tell anyone else because it's a rarer commodity than life. Will's not without morals, and he has questions atop those ones, but they are dangerously sliding out of sight in the face of acceptance. He wrings his hands at the admission to himself, and Margot's green-eyed gaze like she can see it too.

"What's the criteria for who goes and who stays?" he says, swallowing around his hesitation. "Who's guilty of enough to be picked from a crowd to literally be hunted in the woods, or caught in the wrong street?"

There's another long pause, like she has to think about it too. She's not in the business of hunting - she's in the business of butchery, like Mischa and her forsaken family.

"Fortunately," and she says this like it's not fortunate at all, "I don't have to decide that. It's decided for me," she says, shrugging off the discomfort. "This is my first holiday since my freshman pass at fratricide, and I don't understand, even if I benefitted. Do you want something more obviously written out than that? *Here lies Margot's indifference,* " Margot lilts, " *may she have a baby in peace.* And how would I know the next unfortunate from the rest of them?"

"Foreignness. Lack of adherence. People like Alana," Will interjects. "Or me."

Quiet again. The crackling of wood, and songs are the soundtrack to the moment. The same tune as the first night, the tree branches breaking, the mothers asking for cuckoos to spare one of their daughters. The comfort of a familiar bar retreats. The fluid hurt in his head comes back, different from tears, or panic.

“On the subject of adherence, how much does Alana know?” he asks, looking away.

“Not much,” says Margot, sounding less sure of herself now. When he turns, her smart face sharpens, pinched with worry. “But she will. She’ll have to. It’s compulsory - you never ask, but you always know.”

(*Everyone tied together with complicity. Here’s what you want, here’s what you did to have it. You can tell, you can run, but you still complied, and were filled, and your culpability in that decision is meaningless. You licked the jam off the ribs of someone you slept next to. That doesn’t go away. That’s a part of you now.*)

“If you know, you know,” Will laughs a little hysterically, and rubs his eyes until it’s all ruddy flashes against his eyelids.

It’s the kind of bad news no one wants to deliver. *I’m sorry, the decision is final* , comes to mind. *I’m sorry, the hor d'oeuvres are people* , comes next. (*“Dad’s dead,” you say into the receiver, and your ex-girlfriend only says “Oh, Will.” “Oh, Margot.” “Oh, Doctor Lecter.” You don’t know who’s at fault. You just know someone will have to say it.*)

Let Margot think on that a while, the way she’s made him think about justice, and the value of what’s offered to the Lecter’s flames. He slides away from them before Alana comes back, unpaired and unhappy. There’s laughter out in the trees now, and close friends settling in for stories, and he’s alone again. Will doesn’t feel a need to flirt with the youth of this place any more than he did at home. Night five closes as the night before that, and the night before that, and all the others.

Will slides further, through the dark entry of the house, past the darkened kitchen where the fireplace is burning low with red coals, and spares a glance to the pantry side door once more, locked and impassable. He slides until he flows instead, liquid and tired and aching in every fiber of his head and neck, into the bedroom, the coverlet, the quiet blue-yellow of the

window with the wreath pressing into his hair and the greenery crackles in his ears. It's too much effort to untangle it now that it's there.

He'd like to tune it all out - he knows how he's supposed to feel, but it's not what he's feeling, and that's oily like fat. Hannibal promised him more if he can stomach the taste a little longer, but it's between his fingers, and on his mouth, and it tastes good and the nausea comes *because* of that.

Will dreams the stag stands at the foot of his bed, and persists when he raises a hand to rub his eyes and turn the pillow to its dry side. The antlers are broad branches, the trunks of its legs muscled and tar-black. It doesn't come close or put its muzzle to the firmness of the space between Will's skull and delicate vertebrae (*to make sure you're intact*), or crown his a second time in steam and mist, but it doesn't dissipate with slow blinks, or the faded blue light of the nighttime.

It's become familiar though, so he leaves it there undisturbed to watch, huddled in the sheets and sweating. It watches until at last something else disturbs him.

He opens his eyes again to the living room of his Daddy's house.

Daddy's not here, hasn't been here for a bit, just a black path from the scorched earth of the carpet in the middle of the room to the doorway, where it vanishes. Splatter erased from the walls, left in a matrix along his bedside instead. Will recognizes this as where Beau Graham leaves on the stretcher, and doesn't quite make it to the porch.

Vitals were taken, heads were shaken by horror-wizened men and women, and Will watched in mute recalled horror as the emergency response officers and paramedics took him out the door and well beyond where Will could see, can see even now. Spirited away, presumably to the medical examiner's office, and to a long cardboard box, and to the utilitarian aluminum canister that they say is him and handed to Will like he's picking up groceries instead of his

father. Beau stops existing somewhere between the center of the carpet and the door, and here's where Will returns.

No stag though. Nothing but the open door of the front of Daddy's house, not yet bought by a small family that can overlook the cleaner's work for a good deal. (*You didn't ask for much. You refused to replace the carpet yourself, and let it be the last thing you favored with a sad eye before driving back to DC. "I didn't really plan extra time to hang around town," you had said, and two weeks later, you don't have to.*)

Will slides from the bed sitting next to the Christmas tree, bare toed, watery eyed, and sweating despite the shaking of his arms. The white of the coverlet is aurora bright in the lights of the tree, too strong for the inside, meant to be seen from the street on the sides of their home. He runs a hand over it to straighten the sheets, smears the blood, and uses the other hand to find his phone. It's just after midnight, says the digital numbers on the screen, repeated again in a brass armed clock that used to sit over the sofa when he looks for it.

Curiosity in the absence of shock says to look outside. The details are settled, the body is gone, and Will's never really considered the view from where the strobing of red and blue is throwing itself against the old white storm door.

Will pads through the blackness, through the carpet to the little linoleum square of the entryway. He takes a breath at the opening. He walks out and down the stairs.

The front drive is the same as the day he arrived, strobing in time with the emergency light too, Will's aging car sitting out front with the old light blue pickup truck. It streams out into the cracked asphalt of the street where the weeds are growing between the curb and the road, and two police patrollers are parked, the abandoned escorts for the ambulance that has already gone. Across from there, where the neighbors should be, there's the encroaching shroud of trees, grown tight together, heavy limbed with the spanish moss and virginia creeper vines choking out the spaces beyond.

There's a small break in the thicket, and in that, his friend. No longer inside hiding Beau from view, or at the bedside, the black stag is still and waiting, ears flicking softly as Will watches, and it watches in turn.

Thank you , Will thinks. *I didn't know where to go. I missed the chance to find out before* .

Barefoot through the drive, and barefoot through the road and the grass and to the edge of the vines, Will walks until he at last can put a hand up in greeting. The great animal does nothing to stop him, letting shy fingers rest against silky mane that's shadow light against the palm. The smell of anise, and dill, something like apricot, and smoky, smoky woodfire.

It turns away, and watches him until Will follows, unsteady footed but slow and careful. It can show him where people disappear to. The lights grow fainter, but its eyes project a light of their own, and the trees surrender their path, until the only thing to be heard is the careful stomp of hooves, and the whisper-soft tread of Will's bare feet.

Other sounds join the beat as they go further. Resting creatures fluffing wings, shuffling in the hollows of the trunks and branches of the trees. Louder as they go, so too comes the familiar echo: *cu-coo, cu-coo* .

Will blinks. The stag turns, eyes coal bright.

He startles into awareness, barefoot and in little more than his pajamas in the dark of the woods. The space he envisions the stag in is now vacant, and shortly after that man-shaped and tall. Will stumbles forward, wincing at the feel of mulch and grass, and small sharp stones in his feet, not wet from blood in the carpet but from dew in the grass.

It's not the stag at all, but Hannibal. He is silvery-shimmering in the twilight of the grove, in his hands a torch rather than a flashlight or lantern. Each flickering flare of the fire cast his face in and out of darkness, made sepulchral. All in black, red sash gone, but the dim light from between the tree boughs shows the wide spread of oak leaves, and multifoliate flowers, crown very much for a forest lord now away from the house.

Will's stomach turns, as it did watching Hannibal take a seat next to him at dinner. It turned in the auditorium, and the kitchen, and the long hall of the university. It burns, alive and waiting for what will step out from Hannibal's camouflage, now that there's no reason to wear it.

Wil opens his mouth to say as much, though nothing comes out, with the words tangling in his throat. *Cu-coo, cu-coo, cu-coo, cu-coo,* from the trees above.

The other man walks closer, his black boots very measured in their steps. “It’s late to be wandering by yourself, even if you’re welcome to wander here by its inhabitant,” says Hannibal, sparing Will his tongue-tied dilemma with a nod to the leaves above. “Has your fever passed?”

(*Yes. No. What is this feeling you have, this creeping dread and fire?*)

“Did I have one?” he asks faintly. “I thought I was just...leaving the house,” he mumbles, and wipes cold sweat from his forehead away, but it feels not quite right in the stillness of the night, crickets chirping and the occasional interruption of the cuckoos somewhere in the deep canopy of the grove. He was just in Mobile. He knows because he just crossed the street.

“Perhaps you did,” smiles Hannibal. “There’s a lot of spirits in the trees here, and the nights make them restless.” He considers Will for a moment. “You seem very cold, Will. Can I help you back to the house?”

He is cold. “I don’t feel very well,” Will admits, rubbing the bridge of his nose. The action reminds him of something else though.

Hannibal in the glade, and the scrape of the trowel, waiting for something.

“Were you going to hit me? A couple days ago, when I was by myself like this?” he asks instead, thinking days past. “I thought you might. I wasn’t where I was supposed to be. You don’t like that.”

“I don’t,” Hannibal says with a light rise, “and I didn’t. But it’s best to look at things as they are before making any hasty decisions. You have a talent for accidentally looking for me. I find it very gratifying.”

“Were you wanting to be looked for?”

“Tonight?” he replies, considering a spot in the dirt before wedging the metal base of the flaming torch into it. He wipes his hands, turning to Will, infernal in silhouette. “I was counting on it. I needed to show you something,” he says slowly, “as promised.”

He paces forward again, and Will’s mind comes alive with warning.

Will frowns, fog of sleep and what must be the fever still rooted in him, but the posture between them loaded. “You said tomorrow. During Rasos.”

“My clever bird,” says Hannibal, closer still, and that too is something that is new and intimate, “it *is* Rasos today. The sun comes with a few scant hours between her travels from one day to the next, and what we do here is look for something hidden from her eyes, and for another’s instead.”

Will hesitates, heart beating a staccato.

He’s embarrassed to find himself afraid for the first time since the hunt, properly afraid in the face of where he is and what he’s doing alone in the grove. There’s the scantest second that Will isn’t sure where he falls - part of the pack, or part of the herd, and if it’s him that gets to decide that at all. The tremors that have been from the chill try to gain territory, and take root in his fear.

No, not fear, but uncertainty, yes.

“You said...you’d tell me what I wanted to know,” Will says haltingly, taking the smallest of steps back. “That you wanted me to stay. Is that still true?”

Hannibal closes his eyes within inches of Will, inhales, and sighs on the release. When he opens them again, they are intent. (*“A big fan of emotionally compromised youths, your brother,” said you. “Your distress is attractive,” said she.*)

The ground is ripped out from underneath him, as Hannibal reaches for him, viper fast.

“I told you I would *show you* it,” Hannibal corrects in a quiet hiss, and pulls Will close to turn him roughly with hands that belie his ardency, nesting him against his chest to stare out into the dark where the white shadow of the offering stone and the eyes of the oak are, watching.

And it *arrives* , the thing beneath the plaid, and the pleasantries, and the titles that make people feel more secure than they should. Here is the creature that coaxes him kitchen-steam-wet into promises, and plane rides, and the cloisters of offices, wide lakes, tall trees, the blackest of dreams. Will lets out a shuddering breath, and leans back into Hannibal’s questing mouth - here they are. In his white shirt and pajama pants, and the lewd heat going from eyes to belly to his cock growing inexplicably hard in the face of his anxiousness, Will feels underdressed and inconsiderate, nothing to leave for either elder thing here bearing witness to what *education* awaits. He suspected this self-possessed thing existed. He might have nurtured it, in concession to it nurturing him. But still, he is frozen, waiting to see where he falls in the order of Hannibal’s delights.

Hannibal has no such pious hesitations - Will knows his intent when the arm not holding his shoulders drops to his hips, and lifts him like it’s no effort at all.

“And so--” There’s the sensation of pain at his ear, not from the headache that has dogged his steps, but teeth tugging at it. The lathing of a merciless tongue from shell to the lobe, pressing teeth again at the muscle ticking in his neck. Hannibal strides forward. “Here we are. As I have intended, fate’s most arduous disciple,” he whispers there.

The path and the following descent are obvious - he’s carried with the same methodical slowness that Hannibal approached with, and laid against the dampness of the stone as one lays flowers at a grave. Will looks up in the flickering of the torchlight, not visible in the shadow of Hannibal who simply looks down at him, face unmoved. Fingers of a hand tapping the side of his thigh, once, twice, thrice before making a fist. Memorizing perhaps, or a song stuck in his head.

(*An offering, like any other, but not. He’s already buried whatever else he needs. Now you’re something to pour out, honey sweet, sweat sour.*)

When he blinks again, the curious stillness retreats, and Hannibal’s eyes are two black holes and Will can’t look away.

The crown, forgotten, crushed against the side of his head between dreams, is the first thing pulled away with delicate fingers, a strand of the white may bells snapped from the plait and held to Hannibal's nose for the briefest of moments before thrown to the side. It lies forgotten near the torch, Will glancing at it as a hand comes down to push his hair back and wipe the cooling sweat from his brow. Will's mortified to find himself trembling deeply now from head to toe, keyed up and desperate to understand.

(*You mean accept; you know full well what happens next.*)

The stone scrapes his back, made cold by the nighttime and damp by the gathering dew.

This is all secondary to the coal-hot burning of Hannibal's hands in the dark of the grove, which ride from the seam of his shirt and flannel pants to slide up to cup the narrowing curve of the bottom of his ribcage, one hand loose to press fingertips to his belly. (*And you quiver at that, the softness of it next to the rasping skin, catching on your navel, the sparse hair, finding the seam of your muscle and riding it up to xiphoid process, to center sternum. He could rearrange you, and you thrill at that, like the sick thing you are.*)

The harsh pinch of fingers on Will's nipple startles a gasp out of him, before they turn soothing again, petting the chafed flesh as carefully as they had his belly before they slide to the other side and repeat the motion. He squirms, even as the lichen scratches at the skin against it, wanting off the cold stone, wanting to be all over it. Hannibal sees that too, and in a brief absence that makes Will sigh, pulls his hand back out before grabbing the collar of the shirt and tearing it entirely.

Will almost scrambles away at that, the peaking flesh of his sore chest all the more sensitive in the direct air, but Hannibal is on him again, coming close to put a plush mouth to each side. He gives the pink of them the same questing attention as he gives Will's ear, and that softly pressing hand snakes down again to pull pants and underwear aside and down, and only pulls away once he's determined to remove them entirely. It catches on his foot, and Will wonders in a floating absence if they'll be dirty from the bottoms of his feet, if the green of the moss will stain, or perhaps that he really did walk through blood and that's why they're tacky and cold when the rest of him is just burning away.

The nakedness is almost better than the press of cheap clothes against him - naked is a natural state, something the forest stares back into the curious glow of the grove. Hannibal must agree. He is admiring once more, tracing the plains of the adonis belt, the valley of a thigh, and spidery light on the delicate skin of Will's cock, now red and erect no matter the vague fear of the next step riding just behind Will's eyes.

"You think you were looking for me," Hannibal says thickly and low, idly grabbing and pulling at the fullness there, "because you were made to find me, and I would not have made you any different than what," a thumb rubbed over the head, "you," sliding back downwards, "are."

Hannibal lets go, pulls Will's hips to the slope of the stone, and kneels to spread him wide at the legs to the point of hurting. He mouths at the tendon at the join of the leg and groin, bites once with the intent of leaving a mark or a monument to the sharpness of his teeth, and moves lower to lathe again at the spread of his ass and the entrance there.

It's a foreign sensation - slick, prodding, the kind of thing you're told not to do. Will's mind battles embarrassment as quickly as the burning again growing in the center of him (*and that matches the burn of a finger working into you, and you have to catch your tongue to figure out if you want to ask him to wait or keep going*). The crispness of the oak leaves itches at the tender skin they brush against and work at odds with the wicked pointed softness of Hannibal's tongue. He brings his hands from above his head to scratch down the rough sides of the stone, and down to the wreath and the flax-smooth tickle of the ashy hair there - a silky mane, shadow light, and Hannibal does nothing to stop him.

Each breach of a finger is an opportunity to speak up, and like days spent here building to a truth, so too does the aching stretch build between the pain of a split lip and the thrill of arousal, and they both feel good, and Will says nothing in turn. The cold chill turns to heat in his face, his neck, down the long line of the abdomen all the way into the sensitive shake of his knees.

Perhaps this easy acceptance is why Hannibal pulling away with a messy lick to press his cock inside Will gets no more than a long gasp and trembling exhale, lined up face to face so that their humid mouths click teeth, as rabid things do.

" *Oh* ," he says, like he's felt a calling, struck by it. With the setting, and the date, and the unnatural flicker of torchlight, it by all rights should be religious. He's been told sex can be

like that - a great empty space being poured full of fervor, and in this, maybe it is, because Hannibal pours his attention and force of will as God breaks seals of judgement. There's no consideration of ancient grounds, save perhaps craving the grove as a witness, and that be his offering, Hannibal revealed in his truest self the way he isn't for the rest of the world, or even his found family and sister.

(*You, in this moment, are greedy for it. You are the finest thing he could lay out. You were meant to be here, the inalterable chaos of your smart mouth catching the ears of a man seeking meaning in the dross of everyone else's dull order. That you don't value yourself is fine - he does, and what Hannibal wants, Hannibal will wait patiently to catch.*)

It's hard to listen to much else other than his heartbeat and gasping, shuddering with the cold and the contrast of someone pressed on, into, inside him. It feels like being replaced in his own body, or pressing on a nerve, and he's a livewire trapped in an arc. His breath seems so *loud* , more raucous than the slap of skin on skin. His hands are moved to lay prone above the bowl of the stone, one ear driven into the shallow water of it, hearing nothing but the heavy muteness of fluid and pressure, the other ear full of the hiss of breath, and that damnable bird he never sees, only hears out in the woods. *Cu-coo, cu-coo.* Hannibal is never more than steady sighs, forced out of his with each stroke, that same enviable calm even in his zealous need.

Hannibal begins to move with the kind of determination that suggests he wants either to hurt Will, or truly force Will to bid him to stop. One pale leg pulled up to prop over Hannibal's shoulder, the other held as far and wide as he can while driving mercilessly into his stinging hole, and all Will does is pant quickly to the pace set for him.

He'll have bruises in the delicate crease between thigh and the crease of his groin. He'll be sore, he might bleed, he's not done this before and he's ripped from the soil to fulfill this desire, and Will let's it all happen to watch. Having his mouth taken as roughly is a blessing. The press of his erection between them is addicting as it is maddeningly not enough.

In all of this, it's never a consideration to stop.

(*He would, you think. He respects this of you - what you say is admissible law in this grove. Fate speaks it's truth, and fate is forced to respect it as well.*)

Will turns, ear gone half-deaf in the mossy water churning around in it, and watches. Hannibal watches back, waiting for the resistance, and finding none. With a particularly harsh thrust, Will finds himself nodding absently, assent in each gasp, pain gone to white-hot agony and pleasure as Hannibal brings him off with a broad hand in an abrupt three strokes. Hannibal follows after, chasing his own orgasm in as many bone-rattling movements that make Will scrabble for purchase against the stone and find none, worn smooth and uncomplicated and passively listening through its basin and into Will's ear.

Will comes to a shaking halt, dirt and moss and the crinkling of lichen driven into his back clinging on the sweat and dew of his legs. He shuts his eyes to a kiss against his neck, a hand following, shaped to cup the black and red of the chokehold there, native as the oak, and the pulse of night birds singing in it.

He's allowed to drift, so he does, watching Hannibal catch his breath and pinch the sweat-dampened curls around Will's ears with the attention of someone considering fine fabric, the cool chains of a necklace, the rushes at the edge of a pond. The tree and the stone are still in the dark, but Hannibal gathers him close, and lets his vision go darker still caught between sweat, the wrinkled black linen, the metronome of the pulse in his neck.

(*Love, and wanting someone to be with and around, is a long pain that you have often fled. Shame, pride, hesitation, the gnawing suspicion that you can't have things, that you're bad at saying the right things, that you're premature in your declarations, that you're often too late, that you're both smarter and stupider than other people; this is fuel to a fire that keeps you separate, above your father and friends and all the people that cross your path.*)

(*It's nice someone doesn't care about that. It's miraculous they think it's a lovely thing. Spread and aching and shivering in between the scratch of unforgiving rock and the glimmering of twilight between high branches, and the unrelenting touch of their keeper, you feel present and exposed and something to be held and have the rust knocked off your edges and held above others.*)

The mute gold of the torch casts long shadows, and beyond those the violet of the sky, and further still stars that Will knows different names for than they do here, but that shine unbothered like they know him anyway. Their light hurts him in time with his pulse, and the thundering of his headache. Will shuts his eyes to them, and their pinpoints follow, the cuckoo gone quiet with him.

Will doesn't feel like himself when he comes to again, geography changed once more. This seems right.

The decoration of the landscape does not.

He is bedded down on a cradle of leaves and flowers, pressed and crushed into the linen of the bed, his feet the bottom of long white stems amongst the rest. He is a flower himself this way, a centerpiece garden rose blooming in a posy. There are plenty of signs of the forest grove, and it's spongy reindeer moss. He is mottled with scratches and bruises - from the hunt, from spinning and falling in the forest, from bracing from elbow to thumb against the lichen covered stone where there's the crushing weight and force of being pressed to *listen to gasping sighs from himself in the open air and-water-sinking-into-stone-into* -

There's no sign of the house in Mobile, or walking the vine-heavy trees beyond Daddy's house. The mystery of what's beyond the entry still undecided. Maybe another night.

Will pulls in an unsteady breath. He turns to the other bed, empty, white, and clean in the dull blue-yellow of the room. His head is a peach splitting in the summer heat, left too long on the tree. (*You were told as kids not to eat those - rotten fruit, no good for anything but canning. You would like to crawl into one you think, feel the smooth sides of tin holding your shape and the flesh of your head until it has use again.*)

"Hannibal?" he asks the dark, and hears nothing.

The flowers persist, even if Hannibal, the stag, and the stone don't. A worshipful offering to him. They are prickly against his skin, and the sap sticks to the sore places of his body. He tries to imagine them dissolving away, laying again on the carpet instead of the hardness of wooden floors. He closes his eyes to bed down against the idea of the stag once more, and maybe next time come back into the fullness of the morning, Alana or Margot or Beverly waking him because he's slept too long. The dream sticks like the sap, and nettles the red flesh of his naked hips where the bruises have grown particularly dark and night blooming, two great red maws embossed on either side.

He wants to see them in the light. He wants to get the stinging wetness of the cuttings off his moss itchy calves and feet.

(*And out of your mouth, and off of your chest, your hollowed out insides. Not very dreamy, that. Not very out of touch, bringing your own chafed fingers to the cleft of your ass, curious to know how* ***well used*** *you are. Suspending disbelief works better when you don't feel rearranged. The pain is imagined, right? Like the flowers, like the stag?*)

Will stumbles out of bed, puts on a shirt to hide the bird-bright mark at his throat, puts on pants to hide the meat-dark palms at his sides, and wanders down the hall to the bathroom, something high ceilinged and large for what it is, porcelain and iron tub sitting in wait for visitors. The solid door closes behind him with a firm click of the brass handle.

It's morning, but not really, not this far into the northern latitudes. It's time to sleep, but he's wide awake. He turns the knobs of the hot and cold water, waits for it to steam, and plugs the tub closed. He pulls the shirt from his back, turns to stare at the old silver-back mirror on the wall in its wood frame, and watches as it fogs over and mutes his face, neck, and chest until he's not really Will anymore, or not the one that's here in Lithuania. This is the Will that lives in DC, and avoids going home not because he's misunderstood or moved beyond it, but because he's afraid that he belongs, and the only way out is up and away. This is the apartment instead of the countryside manor of an old family, and the water bill comes due on the 12th of each month and comes from the municipal works instead of highland lakes, and despite the pounding in his head, the bathroom is where he can hide.

(*Can that be right? Do your bad dreams stop at the door mantel, afraid to go past the stairs and chase you into the bright lights of a vanity sink? You certainly act like it - you bury your thoughts behind these kinds of rooms like you dissolve outside of them.*)

Will hurts in more places than he is accustomed to unlike the discomfort of his sleep sour mouth. He knew it was coming, when he thinks about how Hannibal expresses his devotions. The affection was tender, but the man who wields it is also accustomed to tenderizing, and promised to show Will exactly what the whole truth of that means.

He can't get mad at Hannibal anymore for that than someone should be mad at him for speaking honestly when asked. He can barely contain it for politeness - he certainly won't when compelled.

The steam rises, the faucet pours into the basin in the roaring of old pipes and water, and Will's head fits neatly underneath the stream if he turns himself backwards and lies back, hair growing heavy in it's own damp weight. The sound of the water rushing in his ear is familiar now, and where he used it in the past to drift, he uses it now to sit in stillness, without thought. This time it's fragrant in a way he's unaccustomed to, the wildness of outside sticking to him with the same determination as the smell of sex, but it grows and grows instead of diminishing.

Will opens his eyes when the water is to his neck, and turns the faucet off to turn and lean into the slope of the tub, resting.

He doesn't startle when the air changes next to him, a wall, a body smelling again of leather, and pine, and the odor of lye soap and and verbena oils. Will almost reaches a hand around to pet the soft hair he knows will be there - his constant friend.

"The sun is coming up," comes the rumble in his (*good*) ear, low enough that Will doesn't wince against it. "And there is yet more to see."

Will brings his wet hands to his face, and rubs the poor sleep from them. They tug at his lip as they drag back down, sinking into the bathwater. Little green and grey flecks float at the top, and underneath that, the drag of nails and rock in long red lines on his hips, the dark florets of bites, the neutral white of the porcelain of the tub. Beside it, on the old tiles of the bathroom floor, the two wreaths, flowers wrecked between them smelling of summer.

"So there is," Will says, and leans his head back to look.

Hannibal looks no worse than he ever does - the bruise from hunting a man is an exclamation rather than a stain. The chafed red of his mouth is the hard work of a lover instead of age or tired skin. He's gelled his hair back again, shaved away the stubble of a growing beard, and found his way into tidy, uncreased clothes that don't know the memory of Will's body working against them. He's drawn back into himself, but Will knows all the tells now, and the picture has rough edges that he wants to worry with his nails until they unravel again.

He won’t ask if Will is ok, and Will’s relieved for it. They both know - he’s not, he hasn’t been, he may never be, and Hannibal doesn’t require it. He might prefer him this way.

That aside, Hannibal doesn’t share, and he doesn’t risk loss, carving events to a shape that he prefers. Look how he walks in the bathroom now, Will’s last refuge. Look how he brings events to transpire to bring them to this moment. The hands that hold him open are just as happy to come down and hold the column of his throat loosely, another single stem of fragrant white may bells pinched between them, landing at the soreness there like a roost. Perfect fit.

Will brings his own hand up to rest on Hannibal’s wrist, and dampens the sleeve cuff there. He shuts his eyes. Today is the summer solstice, the longest day of the year. It starts with the gift of intention, and now must proceed with purpose, whatever that means to him.

(*Your own chance to make a decision, instead of things just happening to you, and you, struck by the obviousness of circumstance, saying it out loud.*)

now loud and full, now far and faint

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pain, as Will has learned to understand it, is multi-faceted.

There is pain of the body. Hard use and illness break down into a collective conscience of ache, each cell straining against the other, desperate to be freed of its neighbor. Contusions break the skin surface. Bones grind and break. The tendons and sinew stretch like rubber bands until they become loose or tear. Fever seeks exits, and finding none, expands to make one. This is a simple kind of pain - relatable, inconsistently present, and capable of being moved on from. When Will considers the bruises and scratches at his legs, and back, and arms, he knows that they will be gone in a few weeks, and all he'll have is the memory of it.

(*The soreness beyond that, from back, to ass, to inside, where you have been pressed into as signets are pressed into wax? Well, that's a new sensation. You know it will go away, or be renewed if the savage affections from Hannibal are a trend instead of an event. But it will go away, as all things of the body do.*)

His headache, a constant friend now, is not so easily dismissed as those things. The dreams, the fevers, the confusion...those aren't new, but all of them together are, and Will finds himself craving comfort from them the way children do. He wants to stay close to someone that can define his edges. He relaxes with each hand pressed over his eyes. He asks for aspirin, or the paracetamol, anything.

Instead, Hannibal offers him food first. True to form.

"To make sure your stomach is settled," he says, running fingers through the little hairs at Will's neck, adjusting the shoulders of a white tunic he's put out for him to wear. Will can't

see it, but he can imagine his neck against it and the riot of now red-purple and yellow that it's becoming - that wine stain on the white couch, undisguisable.

Will nods, and accepts a spider-flax light kiss to the back of the jaw.

The other kind of pain, and this one Will knows to be a gnawing kind, less inclined to leave, more prone to spread, is a nameless one. Emotional, Professor Chilton would probably supply crudely, as though emotion was enough descriptor, and all the good notetakers will jot it down and use it as god's given word instead of challenging it as an anemic answer. Will prefers to think of it as knowledge - knowledge is a delight as it is painful. Existence is a pain, one continuous lesson when you think about it. There are no anti-inflammatories, analgesics, barbiturates, or opioids for that. The only thing that dulls it is distraction.

Beau Graham did his best to ignore it, up until he couldn't. (*"No, nothin' special this year," he sighs. No, nothing to hold you here. No, nothing he can say that he thinks will change your proud, too good for Mobile mind.*) Will is adrift on that subject - he couldn't have known, but he could have helped, and both are true, and that is a pain as well. Family events, holidays, calls in the evening to let each other know that you're thinking of them, and pride of origin are things he had left behind, and Hannibal Lecter is offering to teach him again what the value of those things are.

Hannibal looks him over, fussing at a crease in the shirt. There's red and blue in the stitching, leaves and blossoms and tidy lines of branches and bars all comfortable together in a venous ribbon. Next to the blackness of Hannibal's own, Will feels exposed without his drab feathers - a different sort of camoflage.

"Not your usual wardrobe, but flattering all the same," Hannibal adds, tying the cords of the collar closed. "If we are to participate, we'd best observe respectfully in our costume of the day."

The price is more knowledge.

The hall beyond the bedroom is inevitability. The stairs down to the kitchen a downward slide. The fire is roaring in the hearth, the range is cleared for pots and pans, and Hannibal and Will are the first to it, where Will has become accustomed to being one of the last. He settles at the wooden block with a stool a little cross-eyed and cold to take in the radiating heat of the hearth, while the good doctor settles himself into the mundanity of breakfast, sacred holiday or no.

The pantry door has a gravity of its own, closed tight, brass handle dull in the low-light. While Will does his best to not look overlong at it, Hannibal must see something in his face.

The man shuffles in the pocket of his trousers with a vague bemusement, slides a key into the lock, and unbolts it to sit open and waiting in the corner of Will's vision. He himself disappears for a time, leaving Will looking owlishly at the shaded dark of the corridor. There's the silhouette of a garlic braid, hanging herbs, copper pots hung on hooks. Lights click on and off further down, and as a fish surfaces from the fog of water, Hannibal comes back into view with a rasher of bacon as though he simply visited the refrigerator. Maybe he did. Will hasn't seen the lower cellar. He hasn't dared.

Will watches instead the bubbling of oily meat and eggs in a skillet, and drifts watery eyed in his seat, stomach all in knots. The open door behind him is a mouth, and it breathes smoky white. He wonders if Hannibal can see it, like some dread shade reaching out.

(*Another kind of empty door frame - your daddy's not behind this one.*)

The first down the stairs to begin their own breakfast is Mischa. Like Will, she is in white, something long as always, hemmed at the bottom with vermillion and green wheat sheaths and rolled sleeves to prepare whatever it is she has in mind for the day. She smiles when she sees him, and twirls on her light feet to come up and press a cool kiss to one of his temples, very careful not to jar him on the stool. The skin beneath her eyes is gently purpled, sleeplessly staring overlong at pyres, Will thinks.

"A fine morning to you, Will," she says in a sweet whisper. "I didn't see you out in the trees last night jumping fires with the others and feared you had missed out, but I can see that you haven't."

“Is that what you call stumbling around drunk after dark?” he asks, eyes closed and head low. “Or another euphemism?” It feels like it’s been years since the last person spoke to him that wasn’t Hannibal, but Mischa is careful and quiet, and her hands are cool on his shoulders, smoothing the embroidery there as Hannibal did.

Mischa hums, standing back to head to the hearth herself. “All the children out to play while Mother Saulė is just outside the room - have you never jumped a burning log before to see if you could do it, Will?”

(*Yes, as a kid, as the not adventurous but easily transfixed person that you grow to be and still are. Yes, as an adult, seeking heat in cold dreams and waking to find the fire already tended and ready. The curious gold-white-shadow on oak leaves, the cold press of moss between your toes, and you, scrabbling for purchase against the sear of Hannibal’s skin. “I have something to show you,” Hannibal says, and grounds the torch as one grounds a spear, or a spade, or a hunting knife. Against all odds you’re alive on the other side of that timeless stone, that aging yellow window, throwing your flowers into soft, burning glow.*)

“Not in a long time,” he says, “or at least not intentionally. Not the way you’re thinking.”

“Did you like it?” she asks, not at all shy. “Intentionally or otherwise.”

Will pauses at that, looks at the black expanse of Hannibal’s back, turned away and to the stove range. He looks again at Mischa, pulling the kettle hook with the long iron rod she uses the first night they sit together. It’s with a strange detachment that he notices her forearms and hands, truly for the first time. Dove-white, scarred in a couple of places, a few long scratches at the wrist, but otherwise scrubbed clean as though walking into her own surgery theater. No tattoos. She too keeps her face away, bright eyed and staring down at the copper of the kettle in a runeless hand. Not the ones he’s become accustomed to in such a short expanse of time.

Will considers his anwer.

(*You did. It hurt, as you understand things often do, but you are present in a way you aren’t often, no matter the pulsing in your head, or the changing geography. Nothing is expected of you. There are no right answers, only self-gratification in tears, or sweat, or freedom from what you’ve been told is responsible. If you want to lie as still as the stone in the glade, you*

can. If you want to be carried until you are well to jump your own pyres, you can if you'd like to. You did like it.)

"I did," says Will, because he is not in the habit of lying when asked to be truthful, any more than Hannibal is.

Will holds his breath, but really for no good reason. Nobody says anything to that because it's understood, and expected, and no more revelatory to them than the menu for their first meal of the day.

Will is struck again by how wonderful it is to not need to explain. A rare kind of third pain, that kind - understanding, wisdom he supposes as they debate at the lakeside what feels to be a thousand years ago, to temper the other two.

Breakfast is quite the affair, opposite from what Will has become accustomed to as a late riser and straggler all week. The kitchen grows warm with stoked coals and extra firewood, the smells of coffee and meat cooking (*which smells no different from any other sausage or bacon, no matter what you know about it*), and the soft prattle of Hannibal and his sister asking questions of each other in their native tongue. Save for what he takes to be one jab, their talk is absent of teasing. Will likes to think they are describing their own aches to each other, chore lists, who's going to mind the watering today. It's the most bizarrely normal thing Will's seen, a genre painting come to life.

Jurgita is the first to follow Mischa, unflappable between slicing fruit and bread quickly with a paring knife better designed for work than for plums. She too has been up all night and not even bothered to change - Will catches the suggestion of dirt at the hem of her skirts, the occasional backhanded yawn. She sits across from Will, smelling of campfire smoke, twirling the fruit skins in little spirals as she goes, *shuck, shuck, shucking* them away.

Next is Chiyoh from the back door, two ducks in hand, soft cream and brown feathers hiding the crease of closed eyes. She plucks them from her corner of the room, nodding to Hannibal and Mischa as she passes them, only entertaining Will with a brief glance and a nod of his own before withdrawing into her space.

There are more people who live in the cottages outside that join them today. Will's not learned names, not really seen the point when they treat him respectfully, and respectfully *other* , passing through the house and the nights as close neighbors, the kind you wave to and you learn their names but not the kind you think to send Christmas cards to. The Lecters greet them as old friends as they do in the evenings, going about their work, cheerfully hosting. A part of the whole, but not part of the house. Most seem to come ask questions, little enamel and earthenware cups of their own in hand, warding off relatable things like hangovers or a bad night's rest.

(*Man eaters, you think, are subject to the human condition, so there's some normalcy there you suppose.*)

Amongst the last to come down are the rest of the girls. There is no obvious sign of Brian, but as the last of the guys besides Will, there's not really anyone to check on him.

"Margot is slower on the stairs," Abigail says, still braiding wet hair in her hands, tying it off with a red ribbon as Alana and Margot round the corner. Even she wears the full costume this time, no jeans, just the long expanse of white linen cinched at the waist by a green vest and a high collar that only makes the long red line on her neck more obvious - a necklace worn out in the open on special occasions.

Everybody in their finest for the day, Will included, as requested. It makes him feel a little less like an impostor in his. It's cozy, all these people waking up and drinking their tiredness away to drink again later. He can't say he's experienced something exactly like it, not with Beau, not even with his small circle of friends. There's never been aunts and uncles and well-loved cousins, godparents, adopted kin. There's a warmth to being enveloped like this, part of the crew, their murmurings that of a swell, or the rumble of trains on their tracks in the night.

Will closes his eyes again, the click of wheels coming to his ears when he knows they're not there. Maybe the churning of a whisk in a bowl instead, or Jurgita at the chopping block. *Click, click* .

There's a nagging sensation that he's standing at the sides even as he sits in the center, but then again, Will understands that they don't know him. He wonders if any of them really know Hannibal and Mischa even if they're warm to each other. How many of them are brave

enough to tango with her sense of righteousness and candor, or his unshakable inevitability? The lord and lady of the house, theirs by blood and their willingness to shed it.

“May I ask you to do something for me, Will?” comes the question from beside him, Hannibal never turning away from his task.

Will opens his eyes.

Hannibal waits for him, staring, hand idling at the edge of the black handled skillet. His eyes match the flame of the stove, hidden from others, exerting light, radiation, enthalpy. Coals, Will had called them as a predator’s are, slow burning but indescribably hot.

“It takes more than what I pulled out to feed everyone,” he says like Will might not understand. Will nods, head giving a throb - yes, that makes sense. “I’ll need to go into the cellar to grab more for the others. Can you mind this for me while I do? It’ll only be a moment.”

The cellar. Still open, unbothered. He turns his head to look down it.

“Can I look for it for you?” he asks, watching the fog curl at it’s beams and mantel.

Despite the press of a friendly crowd, Hannibal’s look is piercing. “Are you asking for that?” Hannibal asks in return, unexpectedly light and sharp. It’s the last great threshold, jauntily advertised with a key and a seat just mere steps away from it. “Or do you want me to show you later?”

“It’s what you wanted me to ask, isn’t it?” replies Will, suddenly tired. His mouth is oily again at the thought of it, it’s brass handle, the rooms that can’t be seen in the breezeway between doors. It’s still breathing, chilly and white, but Will’s sat close enough to the hearth that it’s been forgotten in the press of hearty good mornings and helpers readying onions rather than hearts. A cloak of mundanity over the open doorway.

Hannibal just watches, eagle gold and searching.

“I think it’s best that I look at it now,” Will says, and rises onto bare feet. Hannibal doesn’t stop him, even if he should at the wavering balance that Will is just maintaining today. He’s been promised something to fix that and the headache after breakfast - best help move it along.

“The door on the right, at the end. Mind your step,” says Hannibal, when Will turns to go.

Mischa gives them a long look of her own, and says nothing.

The primary part of the pantry has always been exactly as described - a store room for basics like produce from the fields, or flour and hard cheeses to be used in baking and jewel-bright trays of snacks that people pick at from the kitchen all day. It’s dark of course - left open only if there’s someone to vigilantly attend it, or occupied already, but it’s rare that someone needs to come in at all with how diligently things to nibble on are left for passers-by. Nobody goes hungry in the Lecter household throughout the day.

Will remembers Hannibal did say he wouldn’t serve a guest something inconsequential, but Hannibal likely doesn’t think of those small plates as serving, but rather as courtesy. Dinner at sundown - don’t be late.

There are two small sets of stairs that fall between the long shelves, almost entirely disguised from the kitchen doorway. The masonry is thicker here, with the hush of mass and time pressed into them, limestone crushing itself and the small things that make up the sum of its parts. So too is it colder on Will’s feet, but a welcome balm to his face. The sensation is rather like stepping outside at a party to catch his breath.

The first of these lowered rooms is open, no door to unlock and worry about today - a root cellar, with well-kept boxes of clean sand and a wine rack opposite of them. There’s only a dim light in the center, bare-bulbed and old, surely added in the early years of modernization.

The floors are well trekked here and pock marked from years of use, worn smooth enough to brush his toes against on the first stair, where a divot has been eroded away.

It's the second one then, further away from the sounds of the kitchen and the safety of people, that Will is supposed to go through. Unlike the first, this one is closed. Will notes that it locks from the outside.

Normal, expected , he tells himself.

When he steps down the five steps here, meticulously clean, frequently replaced, and pulls the heavy oak door, he notes that it also locks from the *inside* .

With good reason it seems.

The chilly air smells of damp stone and rust - not from the fixtures of the room, it seems. He clicks the lightswitch to the left of the doorframe. New, nice metal faceplate. Bright rounds of surgical LEDs come to life, with a blue cast to them that mirrors the un-dark of the nearly midnight sun, so very complimentary to the violet-red-black of what Will knows is blood.

(*You knew it could be like this. You knew the second you thought about asking days ago. Nobody gets the luxury of naivete. Muscle is muscle, and ultimately muscle is meat, and that all cuts the same way - on a wood table, or on a gurney.*)

It's a tidy room, more than one would think given the age of the house. Two standing freezers, the clean expanse of a steel table, a back wall of cabinets, and a long butcher block covered in more than what Will can really process, but decidedly knives and small piles of silverskin and fat tossed to the sides. A roll of waxed paper. Rows of plastic tubs that can be sealed.

Two hanging hooks to his right dominate the wall, their charnel still draining and gutted down the bellies - the closest of these with a new deer, a buck, only a fork-and-horn with its abdomen split to drip quietly and age. Will's gutted many of these on his own, would have expected to learn to do the same on a boar given the opportunity.

He steps around it to see the second.

The other is Brian, equally hollow chested - cleaved, as firewood is down the middle.

Will fancies he sees him breathe through it. Maybe this is where the curling smoke came from all along. *Out of season* , he singsongs hysterically to himself in his head, profoundly mute in the reality of the moment. The deer and the man, their eyes alike in their wideness and steady corneal clouding that looks like marbles rather than flesh.

He stares for a time, sticky toed and awed.

Will would like to say that he stumbles away when awareness tries to come back, shocked into his fingers and legs with pins and needles, but that's the encroaching burn of fever, that's not horror. That maybe he got sick, that he felt guilty, that the burn moved from more than the base of his head and spine and into his gut and lungs, like he could be punished for taking his day to think and coming to the wrong answer.

But Will doesn't do any of those things. Hel turns to the other wall. He walks to the first freezer.

He opens it, and finds a very tidy package of bacon. ***1100g, LLA*** it reads in precise letters, feminine judging from the loop of the descender. *Lower Left Abdomen, about 2 pounds* , Will finds himself thinking. It's heavy - white wax paper still crisp and cold.

This is probably what Hannibal would want. Will closes the refrigerator door, the magnets sealing again with a hiss. No good to leave it open looking at other things. That spoils the meat, and wouldn't *that* be the real shame.

The light doesn't change, and the fluids go on glowing black and glossy on the stone of the floor, draining slow to the center, but something changes anyway. Will looks to Brian, halfway expecting him to lift his head and scold him. " *Just gonna stand there?* " " *Couldn't warn me?* " " *Couldn't react the normal way just like all the others?* "

No, he couldn’t. Will turns, package in hand to the door, anxious about that little pull ball on the inside and the other on the outside - two opportunities to fail.

But Will’s not alone anymore.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” asks Mischa, both shadowed and lit, head turned curiously high. She too is still barefoot, stepping down from the bottom stair and around the mess below with practiced dancer’s feet. She stands on her toes, straightens her back like she means to crack it, but doesn’t make a sound.

She doesn’t so much as turn consider Brian, but the lioness doesn’t consider her stock when it’s safe, and so too does Mischa.

He finds himself shuffling, frozen and unable to move to the door with her bright eyes watching him. Will closes his eyes to the light, and tries to think. “I think it’s what I expected.”

Mischa breathes through her nose, slow and measured. “Hannibal thought you might know by now. Your face grew very solemn, like a small boy’s first communion when you cast your trophy to the flame.” It sounds so dignified, when she says it that way, but death is indignity incarnate. There are no placid faces in its halls without the skillful press of living fingers to make them that way.

“Where does the rest go?” he asks, nervous, but trusting as he does at the oak. “The parts not in the food.”

“To the fire to become ash, and later to the grove,” she says like it’s obvious, pale eyebrows high. Her hair looks very white here, amongst the last shades to be seen if the others that pass through the two locks are not dead yet. “We honor life. We give it back to nature when nature is ready to take it back, or it suits us to take it as sustenance, as designed. From our own, as much as from others.”

(*“Zealotry is a blade that cuts both ways,” she told you, and you didn’t take that for anything but a clever repartee on the first day you stepped into the forest, and marvelled at the high boughs and how they unfurled for you, not yet darkened by the constant burn of flame. “I am always proud to show how we have expanded the grove, and will again this year, should Saulė bless us.”*)

He nods to this thought as well. That’s as good a place as anyone could end up he supposes. Will could be happy with that, more than the indignities he reads about in papers, or the personal offense that is the remains at the top of his closet in DC, nowhere really ever “home” enough to scatter the ashes.

Will thinks of wan-faced Katherine, and serious faced Jokūbas. They are gone in the first couple days, maybe through gentler hands, as one would do for family. Chronic illness, perhaps, no longer up to their tasks in some way and ready to return to the trees. He hopes there were cups of tea for them, and nice dreams to not come back from. He doesn’t entertain the same hope for Freddie, or for Brian. He is certain it was not so for Tobias and Matthew.

“Six down, three to go?” he asks quietly, looking down the stairs to her, bolting the door once more.

She smiles, softer than she usually does.

“I can see where you would think that,” she says quietly. “Normally you’d be right, and I’d hang you next to your friend.” No sugar coating, no *oh goodness no, not you* . He trusts that more than the comforting lie. The same alien creature that flew onto the stage in May is alive and well in his sister too.

When Will doesn’t outwardly respond to that, Mischa blinks, and is hook-grinned once more. “But you’re something of an exception this year. You’ve heard the song, yes? As you did on the first night, and again last. *Turėja liepa, devynias šakas. Palik naž vienų, gegiulai inskristi* .”

“A linden has nine branches,” Will recalls.

Mischa nods, and continues for him. “Please save one for the cuckoo to land on.”

Hannibal’s translation has been deliberately vague. (*You wonder if he had decided yet. You wonder if he was waiting on you to accept it.*) Six down, two to go this time. A linden has nine branches, and it seems the Lecters have decided which they prefer to break off. Hannibal is rewarded for his diligence, and Will is the beneficiary in chaos pushing them together, his tongue never able to sit still, even to let a visiting professor go unoffended and unfrustrated about his business and lectures.

So in that respect, Will can understand Hannibal’s fervor. Surely it’s fate.

She walks him down the hall, hand at his neck in something too close to the kind of hugs Will has grown up with. She offers him salve for his neck, or something for those scratches on his hands and forearms. She promises he can have whatever he wants to soothe the ache in his forehead. (*“But wouldn’t it be better to rest?” Mischa asks, “something to pass the morning with, so you enjoy the afternoon more,” and you nod, unthinking.*)

She doesn’t bother with the door - maybe it was always just locked against Will seeing it, who always sees a little too far. If Will knows, the rest don’t matter. But where Mischa has kept her feet clean, Will has not - they leave watery steps behind him, too cold to feel anything other than the texture of stone.

“I assure you that you will miss nothing of importance if you sleep for a few hours,” Hannibal says when Will looks skeptically at the mug put in front of him, accompanied by what he’s been promised - two thin white pills, ***ASPIRIN*** pressed into their sides.

He has been quite diligent in his attention since Mischa guides him out into the light of the kitchen once more, where even the fire in the hearth is too bright now. There are still others talking, gabbing about what they’re going to do with the day, picking at berries and sugared rhubarb, and there’s not really space to discuss what he thinks. But Hannibal is quick to pull a chair back out for him, to knead briefly at his neck, to take the packed bacon as a grail rather than groceries. When Will eats whatever it is that he thinks is sufficient to prove his stomach is settled, he’s guided back upstairs to the bedroom.

Will doesn't take them quickly, watching the steam rise from the earthenware mug from the bedside table. Hannibal smiles, amused.

"Pharmacologically, you should be fine to have both," he adds. "I did say that willow and aspirin were akin. Maybe avoid splitting your head open on a cabinet, or your hand on a knife if you are able, but fine."

"Do I need to worry about knives now?" asks Will. "I was thinking it was just rocks."

Hannibal's patience grows teeth, and he rewards Will with bright eyes and a bite to the ear. He takes both pills and holds them to Will's mouth until Will accepts them, and washes it down with the tea. It's bitter, the most bitter it has been, and it lingers long after.

Will lies down to the feeling of hands in his hair, the soft brush of the fine silver-brown strands of Hannibal's own, leaned over him to block the open door.

Will dreams of the smell of rain on asphalt, heavy clouds, and the growing vine decay of the neighborhood surrounding Beau's house. Beau's house is not there, or rather he looks in the lot that he thinks it should be and doesn't see it, so Will circles the streets, feeling misplaced in his new but not unmarked boots, and his new but not yet comfortable flannel.

As with the last time he is sent to bed, he wakes to Beverly, urgently pushing at his shoulders.

"Get up," she says, or her mouth makes the shape of it anyway.

Will blinks, eyes blazing. The gold of the window is the comfort of a Sunday nap. He wants to close his eyes, and bask like the bed is a warmed patch of ground and he's small and

sleeping through supper. The shadow of Beverly's black hair is a curtain drawn over it, matte and secretive.

He blinks again, closing his eyes.

In the next moment, the cold burn of a strike - a slap, from ear to nose, delicate fingers hard on the cheekbone.

"Get *up,* Will, *for the love of God* . Get. Up."

Will opens his eyes, squinting against the blooming pain. Beverly persists. "Is it time already for dinner?" he asks, but the brightness of the light tells him no. A quick shaky handed glance at his phone on the bedside reads 4:12 pm. Almost six hours have passed since he was tucked in.

There's a strange look that crosses Beverly's face - very different from the ones Will has grown to expect of Hannibal, his searching, but hers one of vague disgust.

"Brian's gone," she says quickly, panicked. "They're all gone, except you, me, and Alana. Nothing in their rooms, nobody talking about them. I looked," she says, and hesitates. "I looked in the pantry just now, and the only thing I found was-"

(*All of Brian, you helpfully supply, while the image of him swells in the back of your head.*)

"-was a couple of bags of clothes, but they're all *torn* , and they've got a whole fucking refrigerator of meat, skin on, and that shit *isn't* deer, or boar, or whatever they're trying to say it is."

Will blinks again, fuzzy, sweating again. She's in her black shirt and jeans, and her favorite boots, little black ones that zip up at the sides. She never cleans the mud off them, leaves them for Will to trip over at the door front. They leave little chevron tracks - Will's sees them

now, red arrows behind her leading to his bedside. He sees his own feet as well, the rounds of toes pressing into the grain of the wood with little bloody circles.

He wonders if she sees it. If she suspects.

“I think you’d better show me,” Will says, taking her hand while she tells him not to take anything else from them, to be careful, to not trust the Lecters. He nods through this because it’s what he’s supposed to do, not startle a nervous animal.

(*There is it, that dread, that recognition of the gunshot, and knowing what’s going to happen next, and exonerably walking towards it regardless, like it might change.*)

This is Beverly, he reminds himself, shivering with cold when he stands once more on the floor, floating, painting the ground with his bare feet, and her paying no mind to it. There was always going to be only one that was intended to make it through to the end, and Will needs to decide if that number is significant to him the way that it is to Hannibal.

They pass through the kitchen with light feet, albeit his stumble from carpet to uncovered stone - Will feels as though his head will pop with each step, the pounding at each corner slowly gaining power with his heart. The space is largely empty, save for the occasional fair haired silhouettes of Mischa and Jurgita passing through, clucking to each other as busy hens do.

Beverly ducks behind the island when she sees them, anxiously pawing at its surface - she finds the paring knife, still sticky with plum juice.

(*That won’t help, you think, tracing the edge of it with your eyes, its tip like the taper of a paintbrush. You don’t bother to kneel down - Mischa doesn’t care where* ***you*** *go.*)

She stays low. Will sways.

When she looks at him, she shakes her head. “Come on,” she whispers, and into the dark of the pantry hall they go once more. The light of the outside comes from the far end of the hall, open to the outside, and the shadows of the root cellar and butcher’s cooler darken.

The first instance that Will thinks something is wrong is when they glide into the quiet of the space and he can’t hear his own feet, or his breath, shallow and anxious as it attunes to Beverly’s. From outside there’s the sound of trees, and people talking - an axe meeting wood, perhaps preparing the long logs for the pyre. He feels dead in here, away from the others.

“You should go,” Will says. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Yeah, well…” Beverly sighs, peering carefully towards the outside door. “Nobody should be here. Every last one of these people is probably going to get arrested.”

Will ponders that. *Murder Most Festive!* cries a tabloid. *Distinguished Surgeon and Professor Lures Youths to (Un)Timely Ends in Europe* . It’s hilarious to consider.

So too is it nauseating.

(*It could all disappear - snap, presto! Will Graham goes home with ex girlfriend and likely imminently ex roommate, and you never figure out what to do with yourself. You were cautiously wading into something, but someone pulled the plug out of the drain, and there’s nothing for it except to write a paper about it and be forgotten when the novelty wears off. “I never thought I was in love, you’ll say sadly in lecture halls and interviews, “but I did think I was wanted and cherished, and that’s two-thirds of what love is, and for the moment that was enough to fill this black thing that keeps crawling out from down the hall, past the ornaments and glass lights.”*)

Will stares at the door.

Cu-coo, cu-coo.

He shakes his head, and wipes the sweat from his eyes. It's not here. He knows it's not here.

"The door's already open," Beverly says, stepping down a little, careful of the light switch, and the dark tacky sheen of the rocks beneath the steel table beyond. "Weird - I thought they were trying to keep it cold."

"They are," Will croaks.

"The bags are gone," she adds, the heel of one hand coming to rest at her chin, looking perturbed. "The whole thing is gone - deer, the castoffs, clothes...I was only just here."

The sound of the axe outside persists. *Thuk, thuk, thuk, cu-coo, cu-coo, cu-coo.*

"For the pyres," he mumbles. "To burn down to ash."

Beverly turns, wide eyed and looking at the door outside. The chopping wood, the people laughing around it, the building up to another long night of celebration where everyone has a good time except the people that don't understand it. Her evidence is slipping away. She takes a leaping step up, the paring knife still in hand, to save it.

"Ash is a good fertilizer in acidic, swampy soils," Will adds in a needless whisper.

She runs out the door, boots trekking new arrows past the sunken stairs, to the stoop of the house, to the blinding whiteness of outside. Reality is technicolor when he stumbles after her, thinking *don't, don't, don't* but not a single one of them coming to the front of his mouth.

He hears more than sees what unfolds - three men working at a pile of wood logs, axes and hatchets in hand. In a pile nearby, linen bags, huge and heavy, await transport to the front of the house where the stone basin of the pyre is being built tonight. They do not look like they are for the logs and kindling.

One of the men is Hannibal. Another is the man that drives the other car, Francis. Will doesn't recognize the third, and neither does the third recognize them, continuing his work while Hannibal watches from the middle distance. The image of Beverly, so slim and strange next to the hulk of what she's up against, raises Will's heart into his throat, as though he could spit it out and offer it in her stead.

Hannibal meets eyes with him once, looking pinch faced with concern before deciding whatever he is going to decide. The axe in his hand is sharp. It could very easily gut a grown man in a swing, the way that Brian is cleaved, cleaned, and left largely unaltered.

(*You never have gotten to see him do whatever it is that he does, the proud family venerer that he is. He's always so tidy that any flash of the slaughter behind the visage is a surprise, even when it's gentled by a desire to keep you. Seeing it now, that briefest look at what's behind the door of him knocks the air from you. Beverly is no more than a rabbit to him, bounding at the edges of a field, nibbling at the plants.*)

"Miss Katz," he says, like he means to merely scold her. "I think it best you take Will back inside - he looks poorly."

Beverly comes to a halt, somewhere between Hannibal and the bags. In the surrounding periphery, there begins to gather others - some he saw at breakfast, others throughout the week, and even Margot and Alana. She looks at all of them, squinting past the figure of Hannibal, slowly lowering his axe to the ground like he means to keep from spooking her.

"He looks bad because he needs to go to a hospital," she replies sharply. "I don't know what you keep giving him, but it's clearly not helping him out. In fact, I don't know if you've been helping much of anyone out so far this week."

"Yes, it does rather appear that way, doesn't it?" he replies, not at all bothered. "Family traditions aside, Miss Katz, I am a medical doctor, and Will is receiving assistance to help him recover before he needs to go anywhere, if he wants to."

She edges closer to the bags, standing as near as she can but never taking her eyes from Hannibal.

“I trust you’re still intending to see the celebration through,” he continues, beginning to edge between them, but Will ambles on shaky legs towards her, trying to ward off what he sees coming.

He misses what’s coming from behind instead.

Mischa is a willow branch in how well she flows from the edges of the grass lawn and courtyard to just next to Beverly, a little crescent-shaped hatchet in hand that sits as happily as a meat cleaver between her pretty fingers. To her, they are the same here, and this is driving prey, not a misunderstanding. Beverly must see this is Will’s face. She swings herself around to barely catch the older woman’s arm, shaking under the force of her beguilingly ingenue form.

It’s a stalemate for a moment, the two locked against each other, Beverly with two wrists in hand, and one knife pressing whitely against Mischa’s arm. The blade doesn’t cut, but it beads blood at the tip from her forearm, promising more. The Lecters keep their kitchen knives honed.

Hannibal, between the women and Will, seems torn on who to check first - Will is barely standing, but Mischa is clearly surprised by how tenacious Beverly is, not giving her an inch to arc her hatchet back and take another swing. She drops it entirely when Beverly pushes back her wrist in what Will recognizes as a hold-break. It falls, a crescent winking in the grass, waiting to be picked by up its mistress.

Beverly shows her teeth again, pushing Mischa, and bringing the little paring knife up against the white dress and bright decoration at the collarbone. Mischa makes no sound, save the hissing of a snake, stumbling back as blood flows. Someone catches her, and Beverly pulls at the white fabric of the bag, tearing at it as she did Mischa with the knife until it fall open in shreds, all the fat-yellow bones, and stringy tendons, and membranes fit for nothing but burning falling out in a stinking heap.

Will follows with his eyes the long ugliness of a spine, pried at the edges, but tethered by the nerves sheathed down their middle. The terminus of the bottoms of a foot spreading into uncarved toes. The wide lobe of a hipbone, unrecognizable from here in shape as belonging to one of the missing women or one of the men.

“This is...what the fuck,” Beverly says in a quaking voice. “What the fuck did you do?”

(*It’s obvious, isn’t it? But everything is obvious to you, when you know what to look for.*)

Hannibal has gone to Mischa as quick and careful as his feet will take him, but the woman that catches her springs up, rushing Beverly. Will feels the pit of his stomach fall to the floor, and come to rest somewhere beneath the house, where he knows it is silent, and that it will be fed. His mouth goes dry at the thought. He closes his eyes.

“Get away from me!” comes the screaming rush from above the sound of another tree being felled. Have the other men gone back to work? Was it so small a trouble to them that they know Hannibal and Mischa will take care of it, as they take care of everything else?

He crushes his face into a wince to dampen the impact of steel on wood. Three times it hits, each time more dull.

Will’s eyelids are heavy and the white of his eyes burn. The headache that was subsiding between held breath and heartbeats comes back like a thunderclap, but when he squints over the brightness of the day at Beverly in her jeans and tshirt, she is unmistakable in the crowd of traditional dresses and tunics. So too is the axe in her hand, wet now but sopping with red from where she has distinctly not been chopping wood.

(*Oh good, you think. Aim right at the crown of the head if you can. It hurts so much, I can’t wait to go back to not worrying about having one anymore.*)

He pauses, and takes a long stuttering breath on a count of three.

Things come into focus, even as the sound distorts. Hannibal and Mischa have retreated out of arm's reach to each other’s side, the long white sleeve of her dress torn and sodden with stains of blood from where she has been cut at the shoulder, the wound peaking out from underneath the cut cloth. Will feels unaccountably angry for her as well as relieved - it could be worse, but it could be better.

Beverly, pulling him by his own tunic and holding the axe as one holds a flaming branch, is still yelling. There's some kind of commotion from the side of the house where Will can see someone face down in the grass and dirt near the torn bags, flies diving for the contents and the body there, a small circle of family (*mourners*) surrounding them. A woman, dark auburn hair, proud faced. He doesn't know the woman's name, only that she's been split like a peach at the seam of the neck. The groundskeepers must keep their axes sharp, comes the ridiculous thought.

"Come on Will, come on Will," comes the heaving whisper next to him. He's heard it before, maybe on the high school bleachers, or running around campus, or standing mindlessly at the door when he can't look at anything except the glow of the fairy lights on the wall of the apartment, because it's the same as Daddy's house, it's the same, and he doesn't have any words to express that he needs help. Each step further from the house, he trembles more, but understands that they can't just stop. *She,* specifically, can't stop.

Hannibal, when Will looks back to him, is not anxious but blazing eyed while probing the edges of Mischa's wound, who is herself full of sucking breaths and good humor despite the circumstances. She's laughing even, like it's a good joke, someone managing to get the best of her. He can't understand their conversation by sound, back in their mother tongue, but he can by intent as she rotates her shoulder like she's casting off a cloak - *everything still works, Hannibal, I'll be fine, I'll be fine.* Her eyes are very bright in the golden halo of her new crown of linden and rue, hair going honey-dark when she wipes a red hand across it.

"Miss Katz," comes Hannibal's poisonous whisper. "I think you've rather misunderstood your position here. But rest assured," he adds. "You will be instructed, as has always been the intention." His eyes are more black than a person's now, blown with shock, narrowing now against the sunlight.

But Beverly has no intention of being taught - she grabs Will as hard as she can at the shoulder, and pulls for the south end of the house, and Will follows after because he cannot think of a reason why she should go alone - if she escapes without him, the whole thing is borrowed time. If she escapes with him, he loses what he's found. It's a terrible thing, seeing where the fence lines are drawn, and being spread between them. He's so used to following her, that he can't imagine a time he doesn't.

The last people Will sees before the woods overtake them is Alana and Margot. Alana is aghast and white faced, turning to her confidante and back to Will with shock. Her eyes drift

over and over between them and the white sheet full of bones and sinew to be burnt, the wide shell of the hip's iliac crest too distinctive to be misunderstood.

Will warned Margot. Will asked only yesterday what she knew, what she'll have to know. Despite this, he finds himself sympathizing with Alana - he's been there himself, staring in horror, not sure what to do other than the motions.

(*Now she can know what that feels like - something horrible unfolding, and you, awed, unable to know what to do other than soak it up and slowly dry out over miserable months forever afterwards. You hope she survives it. You're not sure yet if you have.*)

Funny that Beverly comes to save him rather than her, Will thinks. Cultural immersion sounds fun until your classmates stop recognizing you as part of theirs, he guesses. It's too bad Beverly doesn't understand Alana's adoption is all superficial - Will's is that of water joining another confluence. Unrecognizable as being him, but him all the same.

Running to the south near the lakeside doesn't make sense. It's not where the road is, but Will supposes over the drifting burn in his head and feet that it *is* towards Vilnius, the airport, the police, *home* .

(*What you used to consider it, anyways.*)

What matters most to her, he guesses, is that it's not where Beverly remains the last of nine offerings with the auburn haired woman dead, and where Hannibal and Mischa would like nothing more to keep low lights and soft hands on his when it suits them, and rougher ones when that suits instead.

He's offhandedly flattered that Beverly thought of him at all, the same kind of brief consideration that taking the fairy lights off the living room wall had been - easy, the right thing to do, possibly not the thing she wanted. Future law enforcement, foreign policy, destined for CIA or FBI or service to justice. She is living the reality of that far hill she and

Will have admired for so long. Career over family, the defensible ivory tower of righteousness, and confidence in it.

It's weird to look at it now, ears still shell-hollow with the fuzzy silence of the house, peering up from the amber glow of windows to a silver haired Hannibal, gazing down at him and asking him to sleep and trust the rest to him.

(*You haven't struggled, but they also never really pushed you to needing to, fingers soft at your neck save the one time. A part of their family - someone expected to speak fate's heavy knowledge, as Hannibal is expected to find offerings, as Mischa is expected to bless and prepare them. You treat family with embraces, and beds to sleep in with blankets you keep just in case they come calling.*)

Beverly pulls Will over and over again, each time that Will stumbles like he means to stop. He's always appreciated that about her in the past - certainty of choice, the unalterable march of her thoughts. Will's been the kind of creature that needs guiding in the past. She's convinced herself she needs to save him, and Will, damaged person that she's shepherded a hundred times since Christmas, needs to be carried to the edge of the field once more. How irritating it must be.

Blinking what he thinks is sweat out of his eyes around the fierceness of the pounding of his headache, Will wants so badly to explain. "Just let me walk a minute and I'll be fine," he'd say, and she wouldn't wait, and that stays his tongue.

The tall grass and brambles of the forest pull at the bottoms of his jeans, but the canopy floor is gentle on his bare feet, gone green stained from the forest underbrush and dirt, replacing the red. Absently, he thinks that his toes should be frozen - the rest of him shivers like it is. Instead, Will only has the wet sensation of a child pulled from a pool, or the shallows of the gulf. He is gritty, and tired, but comfortably assured of the house's permanence, and that he can find his way back later.

(*You're confident in that, strangely. The same house every year for Christmas, the same old highway to find your way back to it. Deer trails, sunken walkways, little lilies scattered under the trees instead of the big red and orange ones, screaming bright across the street in the neighbor's yard. The white, peeling doublewide, the ugly couch. It's you that left it behind the first time, but you were always welcome. "How long y'got down 'dis way?" asks your daddy, and what you should have said was "how long you got to have me?"*)

When they get to a wide glade, fir trees on the sides of the hills, and a wide swath of blue flowers with their bright yellow eyes blinking up into the sunlight, Will jerks his arm back, and stops. He rubs his temples against a flash of pain, and tries to block out the summer heat burning his neck and soak it up as well. He needs both.

"Will," Beverly gasps, breathing hard in a half turn towards him. Her arm is part of the way up, like she means to take him by the hand again, like it or not.

She checks over her shoulder, and again over his. "We have to keep going, we can't stop here…"She licks her lips, and sighs hard, rubbing sweat out of her own eyes, maybe tears. "You know...you knew what they did to Brian and Matt. Didn't you?"

"He wanted me to show me today," he says absently. He is fixated on his toes, curled into the greenery underfoot. "Hannibal said he would show me everything."

Beverly sneers. "And your first reaction to... **that** is to eat breakfast and take a nap? Look, I know," she says. "I know you're not in your right head. Hell, I don't think any of us have been entirely right side up this trip between the drinks, the answer dodging about whatever the fuck they were burning in the bonfires, and not being able to leave, but Will - *there is something wrong with you,* and they're *not* helping."

This sinks through the clouded mire of his head, the first part, not the second - she's wrong about the second. He knows it, the way he knows who's dropping from programs, and who's on a fast track to burnout, addictions, mediocrity.

There is something wrong with you . It makes him feel like smiling to hear it. There is something wrong with Will, but Will doesn't really think that started at the tea, or the pantry. Or at the Lecter house at all. Or at the university, or in DC. It's not in the cheap carpet, and it's not laying flat beside his father, stuttering through his last breaths.

(*You didn't actually do that - that never happened. You stared, and you called people, but you should have always laid down with him and held his hand. It's why he waited for you to come home, right? So he wouldn't be alone.*)

The light is too bright. Will kneels down, head in his hands.

“Don’t you think I know that?” he asks.

“I mean physically,” Beverly tacks on irritably. “Matt said you were wandering in your sleep at night. Having nightmares, running fevers, headaches - the kind of thing you generally want a hospital to see to. Which is where I’m *trying to take you* .” She peers a bit nervously over Will’s shoulder again, back to where the banks of the lake are behind them.

“Not really,” Will says to the grass, teeth clenched against shaking with ache. “You’re taking me back to somewhere that’s not meant for me anymore.”

Beverly frowns, shocked in her frustration. “Really? As opposed to all the wholesome people back there?” When Will doesn’t immediately respond, she frowns more deeply. “There’s no time for this. Save it for the police report - let’s go.”

She steps forward to grab a shoulder, and Will’s surprised with himself to feel it recoil away. He doesn’t say anything, but *no, no, no* sits at the tip of his tongue. He doesn’t even have a reason why. He just doesn’t want to go, stubborn as a dog on a leash, pulling. She winces, and grabs it anyway, trying to bring him from his knees back to his icy feet.

“I’m sorry,” she says curtly. “You’re...you’re not thinking straight, and we need to get further away. I need to get to a car, or a person that can call the police. We need to tell someone about what they’re doing out here. They were going to kill us, Will,” she adds, appealing to that fear, but it feels more like she’s persuading him than understanding what happened. She’s so certain she’s right, and Will is convinced she doesn’t have the blunt reach of his eyes and tongue to see that they always had invited him to stay.

(*“I think I was looking for you,” you say, and the certainty of the steel of the shovel burns your nose, even if it never made contact.*)

Will knows going to the police is the smart thing. That's what they should do, as smart young people part of a talented program in forensics and law. There's a cult gathering people with unspecified, undocumented grants and study opportunities. They are led by a zealot family that hasn't known any different from the seals of vengeance they pour out since the traumatic massacre of their elders - they are candidates for a great number of psychiatric papers about nature versus nurture, and how terrorist cells crop up in nationalistic religions. This is what he sees in Beverly's face, in the suspicion passed between everyone but him and perhaps Alana before it even began.

There's no room in the framework of that for Will to think about how he's been made welcome, that he's taken into a greater level of confidence, that Hannibal clearly thinks he's blessed, not cursed, and that's the first person to ever say so. How good it feels to be seen, for someone to hear him say the foolish things he does, and instead shame him for it, take it in their mouth and worship it. Being consumed isn't so terrible when it's so wholeheartedly reverent. He has the marks to prove it.

Will shakes his head. When he looks again, Hannibal stands at the north edge of the trees in the boughs of a huge spruce, as though summoned.

Against the background of tall and branchless pine standing guard, the man is a blight, a knot in the wood. His oak crown is an impossible green halo that doesn't bend his neck at all, proud as a mountain. The lobe and apexes of the leaves are as good as horns. The plaid and the smiles fallen away, and nothing left but the hungry person underneath it that just needed to get close enough to close his jaws.

Will blinks, shaking his head more. He can't think of anything these days without altering what's around him. Will looks down instead to the blue flowers, winking between the grass, afraid to see the stag again, or hear the bird, or to look to the side and see the ruins of the living room once more.

Beverly, however, shifts and tenses, looking to the great spruce tree with it's low hanging branches with an unmistakable dread.

So not a fantasy or fever.

"Miss Katz, I really must thank you," comes jauntily from across the glade, Hannibal crossing the grass and thorny underbrush with ease. You saved me the trouble of finding a

replacement for Will or Miss Bloom, who is still yet deciding how she feels about an...extended stay. While I regret the loss of Eva, I'm afraid ensuring traditions are followed takes precedence." Explained like a course offering - *sorry the class is closed attendance, we'll be sure to make room for you at the next lecture opportunity.*

Beverly holds the hatchet in one hand, pointed forward. In the other hand, her little kitchen knife is a shining shard of iron, still wet and sharp enough to cut cleanly through Mischa. It's enough for now - Hannibal doesn't draw any closer, boots squelching in the flax flowers and grass, black and unyielding like the shadow of a tree. He puts both hands up, placating.

"Stay the fuck *back* ," she roars. "Stay the fuck back. Will - Will, come here." Beverly stumbles closer to him, hovering over him still in his hunch on the ground. The weight of her feet near his hand warps - he feels the treads leave their arrows once more. He thinks he feels the earth underneath them bend and compress under them.

"Never a good look, deciding who to cull from your own numbers," Hannibal continues, shifting to look at Will, who is wide and glassy eyed and relaxed. Whatever Hannibal sees, he nods, mouth going smooth. He sees something favorable, Will thinks, and Will's not sure how much he likes that or if it's a good or bad thing. "But I see you've kept our friend safe - you'll have to forgive his reticence. Will isn't entirely well. You should let me bring him back to the house to rest. One shouldn't run cross-country with a fever."

"He's coming with me," Beverly yells, flinching when Hannibal begins his slow progression forward again. "Goddamit, stay *back* !"

Twenty-something female, hand weapons, down slope from a skilled hunter. The statistics tick through Will's head. What can she do but run?

"Now Miss Katz, do you think you'll make it to Utena without assistance? You're not even on the right bank of the lake's waters to correct course." Onward Hannibal walks, feet light unlike hers even in their black stained work boots, blue-eyed flowers bowing to him, Lithuania's bloody-handed son. "You can leave me with Will, if you wish. You can run in whatever direction you'd like. I find I am loathe to part with him when you were so kind to go to the trouble to arrange for us to meet."

(*“I’m not a believer in randomness,” Hannibal says with the gravity of moons orbiting planets, taking in your tears like they are his to keep. You are in the kitchen falling apart over mention of Christmas traditions. You are wanting to lay on the floor and watch the twinkle of emergency lights through the flaking tinsel of the tree. Your stag smothers you in the weight of its regard, and you can’t see for a moment, and that’s why you learn to love it because while it’s not what you wanted, and it’s not the shape you expect, it’s what you need.*)

What happens next doesn’t happen in slow motion or in some kind of cinematic speed - Hannibal just exonerably marches forward, gaining in momentum down the hill until Beverly eventually has to make a decision. She can fail to meet the force of a man in his prime and defend Will, or she can step back and prepare a better defensible position like a couple of rams in the high mountains.

(*How terrible it is to not have horns of her own.*)

The *swish-swish* of the oak leaves at Hannibal’s head is a tempo written in Will’s ears as though he’s bent over the stone again. Without his own wreath, Will’s own head feels naked, where he can still feel careful fingertips gently lifting the may bells and birch away to better see his face in low torchlight.

Will sighs, and watches as she steps back with a numb distance. She’ll go for the smart move, not the sentimental one. Will’s not family, not that way, not the way that holds him steady, tells him where to shoot, draws him with charcoal and his hands, and right now, he’s in the way.

The swishing of the wreath stops in front of him. Will looks up, and Hannibal brings his palms to his face, cradling his forehead, index and middle finger of the other hand pressed into his throat where his pulse is throbbing. It’s with hardly any effort at all that Hannibal is able to push him down fully, this time to lay on his side in the grass, still and grateful for the dew-damp of the leaves of the flowers against his cheek and ear.

“Lie still,” whispers Hannibal.

Will’s mouth twists, the way your mouth twists when there’s tears choked between the tongue and the tonsils, and you just want it to stop but it’s coming, and it arrives.

“She can’t help what she is,” he says low, like that’s an apology, or enough to explain. Hannibal doesn’t hold wolves guilty of their hunger. Maybe he doesn’t hold watchmen guilty of their call to arms.

“Not anymore than I can help what I am, or you,” Hannibal replies, and stands, striding away from the dip in the grass that Will has become.

Beverly is small, but quick - an avid runner, quick footed, a celebrated track star. Will knows because he watched her run the rings of the field many times and wondered what the point of it was, only that she was there and that was better than nothing. Watching her dodge the bull-like bulk of Hannibal who is surprising in his grace, dirt flying up at her pivot away, it seems more useful now. The first thought he has watching from the turned world from the ground is that it’s like watching a deer leap away from a leopard that has waited on a low branch.

The second thought is that while Beverly will ruin this place if she leaves, Hannibal will undoubtedly kill her if she doesn’t. He hadn’t reconciled it happening to Alana. He hasn’t fully reconciled it happening to her either, but it’s happening, it’s all happening *now* .

Still, he lies still, shivering, tapped gently by the blue heads of the flowers.

The chase between them is strange to watch. Beverly can’t really properly run away - there’s absolutely no doubt that Hannibal will catch her, just as Will caught Matthew, so she must fight. Beverly swipes with the hatchet, and misses by a mile. Hannibal side-steps, turns her by the shoulder, and trips her up. The little clever knife comes again between them and catches on the black of Hannibal’s tunic where reddened flesh and blood can be seen, peeking from underneath the wool.

She gets too confident though. She missteps and trips, landing hard on her side in mirror to Will before stumbling away as quickly as she can, Will flinching a little at tiny bits of dirt and underbrush that catch the side of his face. She leaves the hatchet behind in her haste to avoid the man at her heels, and it is only by providence that Hannibal fails to pick it up behind her. Instead he chooses to follow after, weaving around the wide glade to its edges.

Will is tired. Too tired to brush the grit from his eyes. It brings to mind throwing a handful of dirt on a casket. With Beverly halfway to the edge of the treeline, it's as good as that. Decision made: survival first, just the way he thought it would go.

(*You can't keep them both - she's decided she couldn't keep* ***you*** *. There's something undoubtedly eating away at you, and has been for awhile, and Beverly can't fix or solve it.*)

Will eyes the hatchet. Will wipes what is not sweat, but tears from the trough of his eyes. He struggles to stand, and watches the flax flowers nod in the breeze beneath him in assent. He stands because he has their permission, their serene blue petals carpeting the way.

(*The person that understands you better, that holds you like he's finally found you...do you take the risk and replace someone who shared sandwiches and the desire to get away from the familiar? That learns to begrudgingly wade through your grief?*)

He grabs the hatchet. It's a pretty thing with a silver blade, little knotwork runes in an arc alongside the steel cheek. It's surprisingly light; maybe it was never meant for wood cutting and tinder splitting. It wavers in his hand as a flame, or a bolt of lightning.

(*Yes, you, think, is the answer.*)

Will runs. Northward, like he runs Matthew northward with the first poor shot of a hunt, or what he thinks is north to the watchguard of pine with their long trunks empty of branches. When Beverly sees him, she nods and dodges between them, still running forward, but satisfied that Will follows her, at least for now. Hannibal doesn't slow, and his movements are animal and cunning, but even he struggles to overtake her still, waiting for her strength to fail.

Will has no such problem - panic transforms into purpose. He catches up to her quickly, running oblique behind her, never quite catching a look at Beverly's face, always slightly off-set from her. It's a familiar position. There's flowers stomped underfoot in his haste, but the fever is fogging his eyes again, as are tears.

Swinging the axe in a shaking hand with all the brute force of half a year raging against impotence and gravity and however many countless years before that, albeit before his father is gone, Will feels more than sees the severing of part of her neck at its base.

Thuk , like felling a tree.

(*You did. Just now. They'll put a new one up for her, and she'll live a hundred years, and a hundred years more than that, and you will keep this instead because you feel good knowing what people want, and being wanted, and you can honor a linden more readily than an FBI badge, or a CIA appointment - for yourself too.*)

She drops as though struck by thunder, heels crossing, toes catching on a rise in the soil.

Will stops and swings again. That is the kind thing to do, to make sure it's done, and there's no time left to suffer, and the sound of the wind and the dull *thuk-thuk-thuk* of bone on steel become white noise. In some ways it's no different from chopping wood, only the bark is skin, and the heartwood is cervical vertebrae, and he doesn't think he could bear to split the remainder beneath that open to make the components easier to burn.

Well maintained things serve their purpose at their given time. The Lecters keep their hatchets, like their knives, sharp. This one cleaves two heads in one day, and gleams in the sun with a curved smile, trembling in Will's grip.

Hannibal, so present and threatening only seconds before, has fallen behind to watch, walking slowly as he is wont to do, and speaks not a word. His hands, Will thinks, tremble too, full of frenzy in the face of violence, but respectful enough to know this moment is not the same for Will as all the others might have been.

(*All the others that fall after? Those can be commonplace. There's nothing of your past to tear out of them and replant to grow stronger.*)

A vacuous calm follows, filled with birdsong and breeze, and the slowing beat of his heart.

It feels like it should have taken longer. The last time he sees Death it takes 11 minutes past the killing blow to do its work, but maybe that's the benefit of participating - ensuring it's over. Will stumbles to his feet. There's a brief moment where Hannibal tries to take him by the elbow as he has often before, but Will shakes it off, breathing around his marrow-deep exhaustion and thirst. He could drink the lake. He could sink into it and float.

He tries to not look at her, and points his eyes towards the grass next to her, and the tiny things growing in it. There's no carpet here to stain, and while the mess of blood that is inevitable glints like little garnets of dew, there's a kind of restfulness to the scene that makes it feel more like a painting instead of what is rightfully a murder. Beverly is less of a person and more of a slide in a class this way.

He grabs fingerfulls of his hair to ground him. Breathe in, breathe out. Will thinks he should be upset. He's *upset* that he's not upset. The damp cuffs of his shirt brush his pounding eyes and ears, no longer wet by his sweat alone, clinging thick and sticky to the bones of his wrists.

"There's something wrong with you," she said, and judging from how the ground sways and how unmoved his heart, Beverly isn't any more wrong now than she was then. She was so certain he would follow her back out, the same way he followed her out of Louisiana, and Virginia, and over and over again away from Beau Graham, alone in his doublewide in Mobile, Alabama, falling into a landscape that turns out is in duplicate over and over again in the wideness of the world. She lives one last delusion of escape.

(*Beverly wouldn't have understood. She's not family, not that way, and you aren't running from it the way you used to. You are coming home.*)

The image wavers, until he can't see it at all, the broadness of Hannibal stepping before him to take him by the arms after all, gliding up to hold him at the neck, and let Will slump until he can close his eyes against the pitch-dyed linen of his tunic, where blood is drying under the cut in his sleeve.

It takes a moment for words to come to him.

"I didn't want to leave," Will says quietly.

Hannibal nods, pressing his mouth to Will's left temple - damp, hot from the fever. He smells it the way he smells may bells, appreciative and memorizing what he sees. "You don't have to," says the older man. "You've spoken your destiny into existence - now you must live it."

Will shuts his eyes to that, and instead smells hot sun, baking fabric, the metal-sharpness of Hannibal's own sweat who's too long been a carnivore to smell like anything other than blood, the humid ground and pine forest around them. It's nice to simply be held and made small for a moment, and let the permanence of what he's done sink into the canopy floor with the common sense that nature has: to disappear.

He hears Hannibal sigh, broad fingers gently tugging at the hairs behind his ears.

"From the day the house was mine until this spring, there are none I cared to keep, only those I had offered it to," Hannibal whispers into the whorl of an ear, smiling unseen, one hand moving downward to pry at the scratches at Will's back that have not yet had the time to heal. "And there you were. Here you are, a jewel dropped into my lap by the caprice of chance, and I cannot think of anywhere more perfect for you to be."

"Fate," Will corrects, because that is what he speaks in, and that is what he's chosen, not unwittingly made. "The caprice of fate."

Hannibal carries Will to the road, or he thinks he does. What he actually feels is the slow plod of hooves against the sweet grass and the sharpness of thorns catching on thick fur. Were he tracking, surely there'd be a path of black coarse hairs at each of their sharp ends like an outlined path, waving their wild banners in the summer breeze.

Will holds an antler like the handle of the hatchet. Each groove pushes into the skin of his palms, which tingle and burn, and a part of him hopes that they're merely marching back to the grove, where everything is quiet and balmy. Mischa will still be beside the pyre as golden and billowing in her skirts as a waterlily. Jurgita will gesture him forward, as she always does, and everyone is stock still on the calm leafy edges, and the oak tree one opening in the canopy away is gently waving in the fading sunlight. Margot will clutch Alana's shoulders

from the front, hiding the vision of bones poured into the fire altar with a furtive, begging green eyed gaze, an ‘o’ for a mouth, begging her to choose this, horror and all in exchange for their shared beauty.

It comes as a surprise to see the black car come back around, Chiyoh at the driver’s wheel and opening the door for Hannibal to place Will on the bench of the passenger seats. When they’re certain he’s secured, they disappear for a long time.

Will watches the scant clouds pass from the tinted windows, and sighs into the leather until he at last sleeps in the hazy warmth of the closed cabin, the car eventually rumbling on without his awareness.

It’s a nice feeling, being carried after a long walk, and permission to rest while the rest of the family guides them back home. He is light, and untethered, and imagines he is floating from the back of his stag to the surface of the lake to somewhere new. Green roadsides, vine covered fences, miles of people, familiar with their houses of gods, raised on poles and roofed against the openness of the sky.

To look at the house, one would never know it was anything but a lovely estate in the European countryside. Nothing is out of place, all the front hedges of the house trimmed to tidy green walls, the lacy white and yellows of the viburnum and rue that lines the gate and its many crosses are something wonderful, hidden at the wide opening at the end of a long road. This is the site of a wedding, or a christening, or any other blessed time - the sordid details don’t matter.

Waking is done in parts when they come to a stop in the front drive. The first of these is that he hears the breeze, rustling leaves together until they sing. It calms him the same way the sound of the bathtub running does. The second of these is the feeling of a hand on his forehead that slides from temple to cheek, to a thumb running along the column of his Adam’s apple and the cup of his clavicle. It is warm, and proprietary in its assuredness.

Will opens his eyes to Hannibal, and the open door beyond where the rising walls of the house stand, and a sliver of tree to the side of it.

He opts to start with the obvious - may as well be forthright with his reality carving mouth:

“I killed Beverly,” he says, and waits to see how that feels, and if it’s still true. (*Blood on the grass, her little black boots, the winking eyes of blue flax flowers from the ground - yes, you dread soothsayer and huntsman, it’s still true.*) Nothing comes rushing up; only the sensation of Hannibal checking his pulse, and lifting him to a sitting position. The world doesn’t implode. The house continues to loom.

“You made the last offering,” Hannibal replies in explanation, once he is satisfied that Will is responsive, checking his eyes with a penlight pulled from the car’s console. “The eighth, sparing the ninth. That it was you that did it sets to rest any disagreement that the more...superstitious elders amongst us might have with my decision to have you stay.” He glances outside, with that flat-faced amusement of his. “It’s my house, but not my religion to make or break the rules for, you understand.”

The trunk is unloaded by a handful of people. Will watches them, swallowing the dry sleep from his mouth. It still tastes of tea, whatever it was.

“Would you have made me do it?” he asks.

Hannibal seems to mull that like he’s tasting it, pulling Will from the seat to stand in the gravel of the driveway. In it’s center, the pyre is built once more, all the questionable, flammable things hidden in the long logs of pine and the smell of sap.

At the doorway, Mischa stands once more, wrapped at the shoulder in heavy gauze, holding a long embroidered cloth to wash their hands with, and Abigail to her right holding the silver urn. (*Too heavy with an injury for presiding sacred keepers to hold, even terrible bright-eyed ones like Mischa Lecter.*) To Abigail’s right, hesitant and furthest from the crowd, Alana holds the pewter goblet, still dressed in her borrowed finest, and still alive. She hasn’t been forced there, but neither is she happy.

“No,” Hannibal says at last, guiding him to the entry by the elbow, steadying Will’s weak legs. “It was always my intent to fulfill you in learning how to make an offering, not to harm you.” He purses his mouth. “But I am glad that you chose to nonetheless.”

A pause between them.

“There is no greater declaration you could make to yourself,” he says, “that would not merely be a declaration to me.”

They wash their hands, they rub the dirt and blood from between their fingers and nails, and Mischa buffs the rest away with her cloth, determined in spite of her pain. Alana hands her task out, unconfident now, but here, and that is something to work with. The polish is long gone from her nails, scrubbed away in hard work.

(*You hope the relief doesn’t show on your face. You hope she doesn’t take it to mean that you are two against the world, when really it is you and Hannibal and in some ways as has Mischa that have made that vow, weighed in linen wraps and heavy as a rock in your hands.*)

Hannibal dispenses another mercy, once he checks Mischa’s shoulder and stitches it up in tight, tiny sutures of clear thread. (*“Būk švelnus,” she says with a wincing smile and a pinch of her fingers, and Hannibal pulls harder at the knot, tied with shiny silver forceps.*) She has work to do, after all. More than planned for a single day’s time. What remains of Beverly is already gone - locked behind the second door from the inside of the long hall of the pantry, to lay next to her own prey, and Mischa to stand over them in her red apron once more.

This mercy comes with no painted cup, or Hannibal promising rest, or safety from pain. It comes in a little glass container, practically labeled by modern means, with a medical sharp vial shield. Sterile and clear fluid, kept in a small icebox beneath a spill of mint greens and under a lock and key.

Will eyes it with growing understanding.

“So do they often give rue and willowbark through intravenous means, or did you actually break with tradition and get the modern medicine out?” Will grumbles, head turning to look to the open door to the outside and away from Hannibal.

“Immune globulin is rather hard to replicate in nature,” Hannibal says. “You’ll need it from now until the end of July, perhaps August, would be my bet. You smell of illness, like burning sugar, and none of it has paid any mind to antivirals in your tea. You felt better after the hunt because I put an immunosuppressant in that one - clearer headed, better able to comprehend what you were seeing.”

“The blindfold removed from my eyes,” Will says, bitter. “And you didn’t give it to me again afterwards? Whatever made me feel better?”

Of course not, his thoughts supply immediately, even before Hannibal can weave an answer.

(*You wouldn’t have done what you did. Allowed yourself to be lain out and savaged, and then go to savaging people in other ways yourself. Or maybe you would have, but it would have taken longer - longer than a nine day week allows. You always trusted Hannibal despite his different faces, but sacrifice, like grief, is a matter of acceptance, and without the frame of context, you cannot reconcile it. You cannot know it beyond the taste of glaze, or the smell of sulphur and charcoal from a discharged gun.*)

Hannibal nods, guiltless in his deceit. “Not until this afternoon, no, not until after breakfast. I didn’t predict that things would conspire as they did,” he says with a hum, considering the syringe. “This is, as they say, not my first rodeo, and I thought to keep you comfortable until things had resolved as intended.”

“That’s a very fancy way of saying keep me in the dark.”

Hannibal looks at him. “Don’t do me the discourtesy of being misunderstood, Will,” he says, not laughing, but with the kind of sense of funny you get when you hear something so untrue you rebel against it. Fair, thinks Will. “You knew. The night before last you knew.”

“Would you have left me to be sick?” Will finds himself asking. “If I didn’t get you the bacon, or I made a fuss, and I did what anyone outside of this house would have done?”

“What a question to ask,” Hannibal says lightly. “I suspect you would have already vanished through the other door. You’ve spent so much time looking at it, after all. You clever thing.”

It’s an answer of a sort, how Will has been looking at Hannibal, only to miss Hannibal looking at him. There’s not much that misses the Lecter siblings’ eyes, as frightfully smart and dedicated to their work as they are. Hannibal wipes the nook of Will’s arm down, watching for the blue of veins raising under the pressure of the alcohol swab. They snake down his arm, roots from heart to fingertips, and Hannibal attentively tracing each one. The blue-black of the tattoos is starker against the wan color of Will’s skin, as ill as he’s been, and in the redness of sun-burnt shoulders.

The crescents wink from between thumb and forefinger. The chase of grain and other strange lines between each space is a question never solved, from the first day of our meeting to now. When, yes. How, not quite, but was that ever important? But what they are... What is essential, the phylum and name of Hannibal’s thought, someone so untouchable that the needle of the tattoo artist’s gun doesn’t seem like it should leave a mark at all.

“What do they mean, Hannibal?” he asks, and already knows.

Hannibal smiles. “Ask again, but ask yourself.”

Will looks again at them.

A curiosity, another disguise, something that intrigues but holds no more value than any other curiosity that Hannibal shrouds himself in. The respect for modern medicine, the otherness from even his own followers, a devious, libertine nature made alive and real through the concept of religion, but not the belief. Nothing. They mean nothing, or the runes have meaning, but each person that sees them ascribes their own.

Will nods, and turns away from his proffered arm with no protest when Hannibal brings the syringe to the soft crook of it.

Will can’t be honest with himself, just everyone else. Hannibal can’t be honest with anyone else, just himself. Even now, as someone that Hannibal has exerted his love on as a man picks

a rose in a garden, Hannibal cannot speak plainly. *"I walked the edges of a fantasy so you would be fascinated by me. I let your mind boil so that you wouldn't ask why. I took you, set you to my mouth as Christians take the flesh of Christ, and I hid you under my tongue because I liked the taste and it was not proper to do so."* They're united in inappropriate thoughts, and fill the gaps in each other's truth.

"This will hold you over for now," Hannibal says, watching Will's face rather than his work. "We would not leave you to suffer when we have gone through such great pains to keep you."

The syringe doesn't feel good. Neither does taking pills from the amber bottle of prednisone, properly uncrushed, and a few more aspirin to dull the aches and pains between. He's peaceful though, listening to the breeze in the trees outside.

"I feel different," he says. "Lighter. Is that the drugs, or is that just me?"

Hannibal considers his face for a moment. In his hand, he holds the empty syringe, pinched between runes. "You are now. You weren't when you arrived. It's really quite remarkable, the change in you."

Will contemplates this in silence. When he closes his eyes, the susurration of the birch and linden just beyond the house continue to whisper to each other. This is the reality on the other side of the decision. Beverly will still be dead if he flies home tomorrow, as will Matthew, killed by Will's hand. Alana will still be on the fence, spared by happenstance, no real commitment of her own and given her own time to decide. The Lecters, Hannibal, the embrace of dozens friendly faces that love what he loves - does that disappear with a plane's takeoff, or are they little weights now too, calling him back time and time again?

When his eyes open, Hannibal is to his side, stars in his eyes, syringe set aside and kneeling before the stool to watch him. It shouldn't be reassuring; commitment in the face of ritual massacre and butchery isn't in any way a recognizable measure of love. But it is.

Will closes his eyes again, and lets his face be treasured, soft lips rising to make a map of his brows. Will imagines the tattoos splayed on either his cheeks leave imprints, little carbon copies of themselves that don't wash off. They mean comfort now to him, even if they don't mean anything else.

(*You didn't want to leave. You said so yourself. And now you don't have to.*)

"One last question," says Will, growing tired again, and comfortable besides in the heat of Hannibal's weight, "and I think you'll have told me all that I need. You said you might let me know this someday, so I'm asking for today."

"Whatever you wish to know," Hannibal whispers, mouth at the peak of his head.

"What is your chosen name, when you're not being Hannibal? The one that you picked, when you decided to come home, and play at religion in the woods."

If Hannibal is surprised, he shows none, rubbing his chin against the curls beneath them, feeling each.

" *Elnias* ," says Hannibal, like it's no favor at all to ask. Since it's Will asking, it isn't, or so Will is beginning to think. A declaration of faith in exchange for a declaration of faith. "The hart, the lord of the forest."

Will smiles. This too he knew, though he doesn't always know the words to say how.

The evening meal is served in one long line of tables, from the entrance of the house down the main path to the gate, where a procession of wheat and hay woven crosses lead up to their ancient kin at the gate of the house. They align cleanly with the rising of Venus, who twinkles dimly from just above the treeline as the sun begins to darken behind them out towards the lake and the elder grove behind the estate. The evening star, riding out before the moon and her sister.

Vakarine , Will corrects himself at Mischa's explanation, who he honors with a package thrown at the pyre's lighting, remnants of bodies burning to fine grey ash beneath it as the night goes on.

Will doesn't know who it is tonight - it's only the sixth day of a nine day week, but he guesses it doesn't matter - all the days will proceed the same, all but one of the nine branches broken, and he can celebrate in kinship between them. Will doesn't know who will tell the missing scholars' parents that they belong to some higher concept now, or Hannibal Lecter's idea of reinstating the natural order of the food chain. The Lecters aren't stupid - they've done this dozens of times before, and will likely do it until their deaths or imprisonment. What will happen will happen.

He's sure no one would have blinked at the same fate for him, at least not after his daddy passes. Before then, Beau Graham would have just wondered Christmas after Christmas if Will wasn't coming back from college, and that makes Will hurt in a way he doesn't rightly know how to explain, only that it passes when Hannibal comes up behind him and names the stars to either side of the rising planet, and all the firmament close beyond that.

In a change from all other nights, they seat him at the head of the table, facing outwards to watch the night rise. Mischa crowns him today in ferns and gently blooming rowan branches with the birch this time, tenderly pulling hair between his braided wreath to hold it to his head.

"He made a bad joke, when you came, his little linden branch to not break for the birds to land on," she whispers where only Will can hear her, playing with the bright lime green of the birch leaves when she feels it is properly stuck to his head. "A bird in a birch, he said. June is *Birželis* , from *biržis* , the birch named for its brightness. July is for lindens, but that didn't quite match the song, and he is nothing if not full of terrible humor."

Will laughs, bad joke or not, satisfied to have that answered as one is when a key fits a door.

(*It was always there from the start, his obsessive interest. You don't know where fate and design meet anymore, Hannibal Lecter is so accustomed to one, it must have been a surprise to discover the other. Maybe that is why you are wonderful to him - he could never have planned you, just what happened after, and he could never have planned exactly what you did even then.*)

When dinner is ready to begin, they all remain standing. On either side of him, Hannibal and Mischa are again resplendent in white and black, rue and linden for her, oak and herbs for him.

It's a weird feeling, watching down the long line of white tablecloth to see faces he didn't recognize a few days ago looking up to him in perfect seriousness, waiting for permission to take a seat and begin the last of their nine nights of feasting. There's the tiny crystal cups of mead, the pitchers of fresh lake water, the fresh sugared berries in baskets, the rhubarb sticks, the covered dishes of duck, and fish, and potatoes, and mostly perfect untouched silence as each clean white plate waits.

Hannibal turns to the rest of the crowd, tall and glowing rose and yellow in the evening lights.

"Our longest day comes to an end, and Rasos passes into our coda of three days' rest with our work completed early," he says smooth and loud. "We say goodbye to some, but so too do we say hello to others. My sister and I myself have been very blessed in this - please be kind to Will, who will stay, and Alana, who has a decision before her," and with a glance to Alana, red-faced and nervous at the attention, he smiles. "We wish to show them that we are kind to ours."

There's just the briefest of glances between them - Will to Alana, who has hidden herself in Margot's safety. Will sees himself in her, two months ago, holding it together before needing to excuse himself to the kitchen. Margot will have to be her Hannibal. There's no other for her here that can understand.

(*Her turn, you think. I will be kind, you think, but also, I will be here even if she isn't. Whatever she decides is hers to handle, whatever the consequences of that, as it was for you. She wanted to see why people stay, and you will be her starring witness.*)

Will turns to Hannibal, still at the ready.

Hannibal nods when their eyes meet, like he merely is waiting for permission. "But you are not here to listen to me speak...Drink. Eat. Enjoy yourselves, in the confidence that what will

be will be. We are but brothers and sisters under the sun and moon, drifting between seasons. Now," Hannibal concludes, glass coming up: " *Už seima* !"

Down the hatch, Will thinks, and Mischa from her side of the table gives Will another one of those scrunched nose smiles she deals out in her impish delight before they both tilt heads back to take their drink in. It's sweet, and crisp, and completely normal. It's something served casually between family, like cracking open a beer and leaning on a fence.

Will sits.

The assembly follows.

Hannibal will sit next to Will in perfect nobility, and every other meal after tonight, looking on with his unreadable face, alien as night. He will smile when polite, and press a booted ankle to Will's when the nerves of talking to curious people with gently accented English becomes tedious, and Mischa will tease between wincing sneers at the tightness of her shoulder. The moon will come up. His eyes will grow tired.

Hannibal returns him to the perfect comfortable silence of Hannibal's own bedroom to provide relief in little pills and the drip of the IV, and small biting kisses because that is how he worships the whorl of an ear or the point of a cheekbone when he is done paying fealty to older gods of his ancestral home with half a heart. He holds Will, listening in the dark for anything more that he might say or ask.

(*Only you know him truly, and thanks to that, only words from your mouth are meaningful.*)

All the lights are lit in all the windows, torches burning, pyre smoking into the night. A special occasion, marked in decorations and bright lights. The sounds of others, and their words, and the nightbirds are joyous from feast time to well after midnight, and Will sleeps undisturbed at home, with no need to think of anything other than where he is.

Chapter End Notes

Please see the first comment for some of the general and scholarly resources used in this story, which are written in no particular order, if you have any interest in early Baltic religions and their perpetuity coming into the modern day. My use of them was very, VERY, *VERY* liberally stretched, and shouldn't be taken as being representative of it. Some details are almost literally used. Some details are entirely made up, likely inspired by something seen in these, but made up nonetheless.

Many thanks to you who made it to the end - I hope you enjoyed it, long meandering thing that this became or not, and I appreciate your patience.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!